THE PREDATOR'S PRECEPTS

SANGHARAKSHITA'S BETRAYAL OF THE BUDDHA'S PATH AND TRIRATNA'S CULTISH DEVOTION TO AN ABUSER

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VĪMAṂSAKA

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May all beings be well,
May all beings be happy,
May all beings be free from suffering.

When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases.[1]

Cūḷasakuludāyi Sutta, MN 79

Do not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of scriptures, by logical reasoning, by inferential reasoning, by reasoned cogitation, by the acceptance of a view after pondering it, by the seeming competence of a speaker, or because you think: 'The ascetic is our guru.'

But when you know for yourselves: 'These things are unwholesome; these things are blameworthy; these things are censured by the wise; these things, if accepted and undertaken, lead to harm and suffering,' then you should abandon them.[2]

Kesamutti Sutta, AN 3.65

[He] knows the right time to speak so as to explain what he knows to be true, correct, and beneficial, but which is disliked by others.[3]

Abhayarājakumāra Sutta, MN 58

When a house is burning down and the fire has spread towards the next house, any grass or such in which it might spread is dragged off and taken away.

So, when the mind is catching alight with the fire of hatred as a result of contact with something, it must be cast aside immediately for fear that one's body of merit might go up in flames.[4]

Bodhicaryāvatāra, 6.70-71

Therefore, in order to tear down the obscuring veil, I shall concentrate my mind in meditation, constantly on the proper object, dragging it from false paths.[5]

Bodhicaryāvatāra, 8.186

It is for the sake of understanding that the Sage taught this entire collection of preparations. Therefore, in the desire to put an end to suffering, one should develop understanding.

It is agreed that there are these two truths: the conventional and the ultimate. Reality is beyond the scope of intellection. Intellection is said to be the conventional.

In the light of this, people are seen to be of two types: namely, the spiritually developed and the spiritually undeveloped. Of these, the world-view of the undeveloped is invalidated by the world-view of the spiritually developed.

Even the views of the spiritually developed are invalidated by the superior understanding of those at successively higher levels, by means of an analogy which is accepted by both parties, irrespective of what they intend to prove.[6]

Bodhicaryāvatāra, 9.1-4

Throughout beginningless time and throughout the limits of cyclic existence, [we] have roamed within these turning worlds driven on by the forces of [ripening] past actions — [endlessly] drinking the poisons of dissonant states and false perspectives on reality.

May The One Gone to Bliss, king among compassionate physicians, [grant] the medicine of liberation, the nectar of the genuine teachings, [to those of us] who are severely afflicted by the [primal] disease, which is suffering!

May all the diseases caused by bewildering dissonant states be pacified! May we be sustained in the nucleus of unsurpassed enlightenment! We take refuge in you, O compassionate lord of loving kindness! We confess that we have contradicted the buddha-mind![7]

Natural Liberation through Acts of Confession: Confession [in the Presence] of the Inexpressible Truth

INTRODUCTION

This book arises from my experiences as a former member of the Triratna Buddhist Community, in which I was actively involved until recently. Unless otherwise stated, the views expressed herein are my own sincerely held opinions, grounded in observed facts.

I believe the publication of this book serves a clear and compelling public interest. My deepest hope is that it will contribute to the authentic transmission of the Buddha's Dharma in the West by enabling Triratna to flourish as a mature, healthy, and genuinely Buddhist movement. I seek to further this aim by bringing any continuing sources of harm respectfully yet firmly to the attention of the senior members of the Triratna Buddhist Order, who are in the best position to effect lasting change. These writings may also prove valuable to the wider public — particularly to those considering involvement with Triratna who seek honest reassurance that the concerns raised here are being meaningfully addressed.

The book is therefore addressed both to those outside the Triratna community and to members within it who have encountered similar doubts to my own, or who, while remaining committed, are open to assisting in the refinement of practices and principles that may still be causing harm or contributing to the quiet attrition of membership.

Out of compassion, I offer current members the following guidance: before proceeding, ask yourself honestly, "Can I encounter a sustained and at times searching critique of Sangharakshita and certain Triratna practices and principles while maintaining genuine equanimity?" If

the answer is no, I kindly invite you to set this book aside until a time when you can answer yes.

The choice of title was a tough one. Opting for "The Predator's Precepts" became obvious because: a.) it represents facts already known to many; and b.) having such a strong title would help cut through any ignorance of those facts.

Should critics refer to this book in the pejorative, I would simply invite readers to form their own judgement after engaging with the work in its entirety. I have endeavoured throughout to write from a mind of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Should any passage appear to fall short of that standard, I ask your forgiveness in advance. I lay no claim to full liberation, only to sincere practice directed toward that end. It is not my intention to give offence to any member of the Triratna Buddhist Community or to those outside it. My intention is the very opposite: to contribute, in however small a way, to the awakening of all beings. I hope this book may stimulate compassionate and honest reflection on matters that are often sidestepped amid the pressures of daily life or the urgency of personal practice. The Buddha identified ignorance as the root cause of continued *saṃsāric* existence; with the cessation of ignorance, suffering itself ceases.

Unless I explicitly indicate otherwise, the analyses of the Dharma offered in this book represents my own understanding, derived primarily from sustained study of the *Sutta Piṭaka*[8] and lived practice within that framework. At the same time, I hold the bodhisattva ideal in profound esteem, and it is partly because of that aspiration that I have undertaken the writing of this series.

I reject the term "Hīnayāna" ("lesser vehicle") when it is used pejoratively to imply the spiritual inferiority of those who follow the earlier scriptures. Such language can only engender ill-will. I concur with Śāntideva's counsel that equal respect should be shown to both vehicles[9], but I cannot accept the notion that the Mahāyāna is accessible only to a select few deemed worthy. In my view, that position constitutes wrong view, for it contradicts the Buddha's open invitation to "come and see" (*ehipassiko*), so beautifully expressed in the *Kesamutti Sutta*. The path the Buddha taught is universally offered; its ultimate verification lies not in authoritative pronouncement but in direct knowing and seeing.

If, while reading this book, you remain convinced that there truly exists a "lesser" and a "greater" vehicle, I respectfully invite you — at least for the duration of your reading — to suspend that conviction and remain open to another view. I have no desire to convert anyone, but a reflexive aversion to a Pāli-centred critique of Sangharakshita may cause one to overlook insights that might prove valuable, both personally and for others.

Buddhism still has immense gifts to offer the Western mind, and I believe Triratna retains the potential to be a significant vehicle for the transmission of the Dharma in the West for generations to come. Yet I do not believe it is presently fully fit for that purpose while it remains so closely bound to the person and legacy of its founder, Sangharakshita.

The issues raised in these pages will inevitably prove painful for some — particularly those Order members whose devotion to Sangharakshita is wholehearted and unqualified. To them I gently recall the Buddha's own words in the *Kesamutti Sutta*, quoted at the outset: we must be prepared to question even our most revered

teacher and to relinquish whatever leads to harm, whether to ourselves or to others.

We are not authorities on the Dharma merely by virtue of belonging to a particular consensus or lineage. The Buddha explicitly warned against blind adherence to tradition or teacher. While that caution applies even to lineages that have preserved the teachings with remarkable fidelity, it applies *a fortiori* to any lineage that is eclectic by design and incorporates substantial non-Buddhist elements, as Sangharakshita's undeniably does.

I have made many dear friends within the Triratna community, and I have no wish for this book to jeopardise those connections. The warmth and kindness I have received from Triratna friends during my time there have been a genuine support on the path.

Nor do I wish to precipitate a crisis of faith in anyone. Any doubt that arises when one walks the true path taught by the Buddha is an opportunity for deeper contemplative inquiry. I encourage you to meet as a saṅgha, share your doubts openly, and together ensure that the living Dharma endures far into the future.

Vīmaṃsaka
7 December 2025

Contents

Introduction 4

Entering the Fold 13

Doctrinal Drifts 31

A New Society? 49

The Myth of Lineage 61

A Profound Betrayal 75

Cultish Commitments 81

Entering the Sangha, 2007 91

The Seven Papers 95

What is the Western Buddhist Order? 99

Revering and Relying Upon the Dharma 113

Re-imagining the Buddha 123

Buddhophany 133

Initiation into a New Life: The Ordination Ceremony in Sangharakshita's System of Spiritual Practice 141

A Supra-personal Force or Energy Working Through Me 149

The Dharma Revolution and the New Society 155

A Buddhist Manifesto: The Principles of the Triratna Buddhist Community 163

Seven Papers In Summary 173

The Seven Papers Revisited 181

Reclaiming the Dharma 189

Triratna Kalyānamitta Sangha 215

Notes 225

ENTERING THE FOLD

A Mitra's First Glimpse of 'Perfect Vision'

My initial engagement with the Triratna Buddhist Community (formerly FWBO or "Friends of the Western Buddhist Order") took place decades ago at a time when life's assorted difficulties had prompted me to explore meditation as a possible remedy. I had read about it in books but had never attended an actual class. One summer afternoon, eager to experience authentic Buddhist meditation, I searched for a local Buddhist centre and found the one in my city, which offered regular lunchtime drop-in sessions.

I arrived early, parked nearby, and walked the short distance to the Centre. Inside, I was greeted by two warmly welcoming people who invited me to browse the bookshop or chat until the class began. I had recently finished reading an introductory book on Buddhism, so I possessed a rudimentary acquaintance with the Buddha's life, yet remained very much a novice. I fell into conversation with one of the Centre's people about the Buddha's teachings. I learned that they are called the Dharma — a Sanskrit term that, in this context, denotes both the body of truth he revealed and the path that leads to direct realisation of reality's true nature.

A suggested contribution of £5 was mentioned for the class, with the gentle clarification that one might give more, less, or nothing at all according to circumstance. I found this approach deeply appealing: here was ancient wisdom offered not as a commodity but as an act of open-handed generosity.

When the session began, the handful of us climbed the stairs to the shrine room: a serene, open space with a

Buddha *rūpa* (statue — literally "form") on a shrine. We were shown how to sit, some choosing the floor on cushions, others using chairs.

The teacher then led us through the Mindfulness of Breathing practice: first counting exhalations from one to ten, then inhalations, then abandoning the counting altogether and resting attention on the subtle sensations of the breath itself. I recall a quiet delight in noticing how each out-breath seemed to end with a delicate, almost luminous "pulse" that seamlessly ushered in the next in-breath.

That same night, lying in bed, I decided to practise what I had learned. After scarcely twenty minutes a profound calm and gentle bliss arose, so complete that when I finally rolled onto my side sleep came almost instantly. Although many years would pass before I returned to the Centre, I continued this bedtime meditation faithfully, growing intimately acquainted with its deepening gifts of peace and clarity.

As the years passed, the various hardships that had weighed upon me before gradually receded. Then came 2020, the pandemic, and with it the abrupt shift from an office environment enriched by daily human contact to the solitude of working from home.

As the pandemic dragged on, and as political polarisation seeped into every corner of the news and social media, a painful rift opened between me and someone close to me, who I shall refer to as N. Though we lived miles apart, we had previously spoken or messaged in a meaningful way, and I cherished the infrequent contact. That fragile connection fractured around the time of the pandemic. Looking back, I assign no blame; we were each exhausted, isolated, and clinging to impossible expectations of how the other ought to think, speak, and behave.

A deep longing arose in me for a restored, happy connection and eventually we managed to arrange a small reunion. N attended together with others. The first day was joyful. The second day, regrettably, was another matter, and yet again I had a falling-out with N to the dismay of others present.

For several days afterwards I sat alone in my home, engulfed by a sense of banishment and corrosive self-reproach. I returned intensively to the Mindfulness of Breathing practice that had served me so well in earlier crises, and I read books on meditation and mindfulness. Yet these measures no longer sufficed. I knew that nothing short of a fundamental change in my way of life would restore any semblance of equilibrium.

I began searching for a meditation community. My thoughts turned to the local Buddhist Centre, from my encounter with them years earlier. Their website showed an introductory course in Buddhism and meditation that was due to begin in a few weeks' time, long enough for the idea of spending a few hours a week among like-minded people to grow from tentative hope into genuine anticipation. I enrolled at once, noting also that an introductory retreat was scheduled after the course had finished. The course proved transformative. It was led by ordained members of the Triratna Buddhist Order and supported by Mitras.

At this point, for readers unfamiliar with Triratna, a brief explanation of the terms "Mitra" and "Order member" may be helpful.

Within the Triratna Buddhist Community, a Mitra is someone who has formally declared themselves a Buddhist and has concluded that Triratna offers the spiritual path most suited to them. At my local Triratna Centre, those who have newly become Mitras are invited

to take part in a public ceremony held on one of the three major festival days of the Buddhist year. I shall describe my own Mitra ceremony later; for the moment, however, the simplest way to understand the status of Mitra is as a person who has made a deeper commitment to their local centre and who may, now, or in the future, wish to request Ordination.

A member of the Triratna Buddhist Order is almost always a former Mitra who has completed the lengthy and demanding Ordination process. This process involves following a structured programme of training, attending regular intensive group meetings that include confession practice, undertaking wide-ranging study, and participating in specific retreats. When the candidate is deemed ready, they are invited to join a three-month ordination retreat at either the men's or the women's ordination centre in Spain.

Resuming our account of the introductory course in Buddhism at my local Triratna Buddhist Centre, the Order members introduced us to the essential principles of the Dharma and outlined the structure of the weeks ahead. We were then divided into small groups in which we would explore, through discussion, the themes that had been presented in the larger plenary sessions.

Three meditative practices were taught: the Mindfulness of Breathing, the *Mettā Bhāvanā* (the cultivation of loving-kindness), and 'Just Sitting'. The *Mettā Bhāvanā* merits particular mention here, for it later proved central to the way we were guided to work with our feelings towards those people we find difficult. The practice unfolds in five stages:

1. cultivating loving-kindness towards oneself;
2. cultivating loving-kindness towards a good friend;
3. cultivating loving-kindness towards a neutral person;
4. cultivating loving-kindness towards a difficult person;
5. equalising the feeling across the previous four stages and then radiating loving-kindness impartially to all beings.

I found the *Mettā Bhāvanā* practice particularly helpful in managing the intense emotions that arose from the fallout with N. By placing N in the fourth stage as the 'difficult person' — after having already cultivated loving-kindness towards myself, a good friend, and a neutral person — I was able to extend genuine forgiveness and a sense of healing towards N. The practice also enabled me to release any resentment I had been carrying.

(Later, whenever I struggled with Sangharakshita's ethical misconduct and the painful contradiction it posed to his role as my teacher, I would deliberately place him in that same fourth stage. In retrospect, I recognise this as the propagation of ignorance and cultivation of delusion.)

As the introductory course unfolded, I formed warm connections with several fellow participants and grew increasingly grateful to the course leaders, enjoying our conversations about the Buddha and the Dharma. I became so enthusiastic about Buddhism that I began to build an extensive library of Buddhist books centred mainly around the earliest scriptures contained in the Pāli Canon.

For readers unfamiliar with Buddhist literature, the Pāli Canon is the vast body of teachings traditionally re-

garded as tracing back to the Buddha himself, who lived over 2,500 years ago. It constitutes a profound repository of wisdom, encompassing guidance on ethics, meditation, and insight, drawn from the Buddha's own awakening and from the enlightened discourses of certain of his disciples.

I greatly enjoyed discussing these suttas with the Order members who led the course. Yet I sensed that, within Triratna, the Pāli Canon was treated as valuable but secondary material; there appeared to be another, more central source of teachings that carried greater authority for them. At that stage, however, I had no clear understanding of how Buddhist doctrine was transmitted within the movement. I was simply grateful to be in the company of committed Buddhists who knew of the suttas.

By the conclusion of the main course I had undergone a profound shift in perspective. I felt a deep, warm affinity for the centre and had already decided to continue attending. It was evident to me that Buddhism suited my temperament and was proving an effective means of working through some of the most painful issues in my life.

Upon completing the course, we were invited to attend "Sangha Night", the weekly gathering for meditation and Dharma teaching, and were also encouraged to join an upcoming day-retreat. I attended my first Sangha Night at the earliest opportunity and found it thoroughly enjoyable, renewing acquaintances with the course leaders and meeting new people.

Throughout the introductory course itself, the founder of Triratna — Sangharakshita — was barely mentioned, if at all. Someone may have inquired about his portrait on the wall, but no controversy was raised. It was only on the final day-retreat — around eight weeks in — that we

were formally introduced to the history of his "unskilful behaviour" in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as to reports of other instances of problems within the wider Order.

A few days before the retreat I had searched online and discovered references to these issues, including the official report commissioned by the Order. Thus forewarned, I arrived at the Centre with a basic grasp of the situation.

The presentation we received was carefully measured: during the 1970s and 1980s Sangharakshita had engaged in consensual sexual relationships with a number of men within the then FWBO. Some of these relationships had ended unsatisfactorily; Sangharakshita was acknowledged to have been a poor communicator at times and to have caused distress. He had since recognised that his conduct had not always been ethically skilful and had offered generalised apologies to anyone affected.

We were also informed about wider historical problems within the movement, reassured that robust safeguarding policies were now in place, and directed to the movement's official report "Addressing Ethical Issues in Triratna"[10] for further detail. The leaders made themselves available for questions, after which we broke into small discussion groups.

In my group, one man expressed profound disquiet, describing what he had heard as deeply harmful and indicating that he would not continue with Triratna. I never saw him again.

My own response was ambivalent. I was reassured by the movement's proactive implementation of safeguarding measures, yet disappointed to discover a serious shadow over an organisation that had, until then, appeared wholly benevolent and transformative. During the discussion I found myself unquestioningly re-articulating the view — established by the leaders and in parts of the

official report — that the 1970s and 1980s were a period of widespread sexual experimentation, and that Sangharakshita had regrettably failed to foresee the harm his actions as leader might cause.

This perspective is given on page 12 of "Addressing Ethical Issues in Triratna":

> "For some of the individuals who looked up to Sangharakshita as a spiritual teacher, and who were also sexually involved with him, the emotional impact was painful and long-lasting.
>
> "It is important to be aware that this was not the case for everyone with whom Sangharakshita had a sexual encounter and that attitudes towards sexual relations have changed greatly since the 1970s and '80s. Important generational differences have also emerged; and some older Order members who were involved in these events told us that they feared that past events were being misrepresented because they were unfairly judged according to today's very different expectations."

My notably lenient response to the mention of those controversies arose from a confluence of circumstances: I was as yet unaware of the full gravity of the allegations; I had already read the official report, which had framed the issues with measured restraint; and, most significantly, I was suffused with an unaccustomed warmth and loving-kindness that had arisen during the introductory Buddhism course I had just completed. It would be several years before I encountered the detailed testimonies published online and realised the extent of his predatory and abusive behaviour.

The remainder of the day-retreat passed pleasantly: a shared vegan lunch, further sessions on meditation and Dharma, and — apart from that brief discussion of the controversies — an experience I found wholly uplifting.

By the end, I felt clear that I wished to continue attending the Centre, particularly for Sangha Night, and to deepen my engagement with the Buddhist path I had only recently discovered.

I soon sought ways to extend my practice. The Centre offered a natural progression of courses, and I enrolled in one, while also beginning to attend weekend events. Through a website, I discovered their network of retreat centres and, drawn to the photographs of its setting, booked a retreat at a pretty location for a period in the Summer.

Meanwhile, my exploration of the Pāli Canon deepened. My library grew to include complete translations of the four main Nikāyas, many Khuddaka texts, and a wide range of commentaries and Mahāyāna works. The collection continues to expand. I return frequently to these texts, finding in each revisit fresh depth and renewed inspiration, and I spend a considerable portion of my time immersed in the joy of studying, contemplating, and living the Dharma.

Retreats

In the Summer I spent a week at the retreat centre in the company of some twenty other retreatants. The days were gentle: morning teachings on meditation and the Dharma, pleasant walks, afternoons relaxing. Silence was observed each night until after breakfast, and on one full day we kept silence throughout. I found the practice instructive yet never entirely congenial — something I shall return to later — yet the memory of that week remains fondly etched in my mind.

Sangharakshita's name was scarcely mentioned. Indeed, across all the introductory retreats I later attended within the Triratna community, his presence was barely acknowledged. The teachings were offered without hier-

archy or lineage emphasis, resting solely on the authority of the Buddha himself and on a shared sense of human spiritual possibility. Poetry featured lightly alongside some meditations, and each evening we gathered in the shrine room for a “Threefold-“ or “Sevenfold-Puja”.

A puja in the Triratna tradition is a devotional ceremony in which verses — commonly those adapted by Sangharakshita[11] from established Buddhist teachings, though increasingly written by other Order members — are led by one person and echoed in unison by the assembly. Around the middle of the puja, the sangha chants a mantra while individuals rise in turn to make their offerings at the shrine. As the last offering draws to a close, the volume gradually diminishes until only the faintest thread of vocal sound remains.

My first full retreat left me with a profound sense of peace and calm, and what felt like a growing attachment to Triratna. Almost immediately upon my return, I resolved to book another retreat without delay.

I could easily fill many pages with accounts of all the retreats I attended whilst I was a member of the Triratna community, but for present purposes it suffices to note that several placed particular weight upon Sangharakshita’s teachings and his poetry, and that on every single retreat his pujas were performed each evening. During the time I was a member of Triratna I attended retreats at several Triratna centres across Britain — some of them more than once.

As I mentioned earlier, my first retreat required us to observe silence from the end of the evening session until after breakfast the following day. Silence is a standard

feature of Triratna retreats, as it is in most other Buddhist traditions.

On one retreat I attended, we kept silence for a full seven days, though we were permitted to speak briefly during daily private meditation interviews with the retreat leader (sessions that lasted about fifteen minutes) and to ask questions during the teaching periods.

Friends who are ordained members of the Triratna Buddhist Order have told me that on some Order retreats the silence may extend for two weeks or even longer.

The disciplined practice of silence in long-established Buddhist lineages is rightly regarded as a noble and profound observance. Indeed, the Buddha frequently commended it, saying such things as:

> "When you gather together, bhikkhus, you should do either of two things: hold discussion on the Dhamma or maintain noble silence."[12]
>
> *Pāsarāsi Sutta*, MN 26

In retrospect, I find myself compelled to articulate the reservations I now harbour regarding enforced periods of silence. With the passage of time, it has become increasingly evident to me that such mandatory silence within a group setting can engender a subtle power imbalance, fostering a sense, whether conscious or unconscious, of oppression exerted by the institution itself. This persists notwithstanding the entirely voluntary nature of one's participation — one remains at liberty to depart at any moment, as indeed some participants did, for whatever reason.

There were occasions when an indefinable unease permeated the total silence. We were not permitted to engage in Dharma discussion as an alternative, despite the Buddha's own instruction to his monks that silence be

employed precisely for such noble conversation to flourish. At times, particularly during the initial hours of a silence period or when sharing a dormitory with a complete stranger, I detected faint undercurrents of unease conveyed through posture and glance. Both in response to these perceptions and to any aversion that arose in me towards others, I learned to practise by deliberately directing loving-kindness towards them, recognising that they, too, were navigating the same unnatural constraint.

Looking back, I now question whether repeatedly training oneself to detach from perceived environmental threat may carry indirect consequences. Whilst becoming more at peace with my sense of unease around strangers, was it possible that I was also habituating myself to sit kindly with the unease I felt regarding Sangharakshita's "unskilful behaviour"? He would often pop into my mind and so, in a sense, he too was a frequent silent presence in the room with me.

The relevant Buddhist context here is the conjunction of mindful attention to feelings (*vedanā*) simply as transient phenomena and the systematic cultivation of loving-kindness (*mettā*). Practitioners are trained to meet pleasant, neutral, and unpleasant sensations with equanimity, neither clinging nor reacting unskilfully. Should a sense of threat or fear arise, the seasoned meditator may simply remain present with the feeling, allowing it to pass without suppression or identification — not thinking "I am the one who is afraid." Thus, in the face of any non-physical threat, most experienced practitioners can maintain considerable calm, noting each arising sensation without permitting the pressure of contact to disturb the mind.

Physical threats, being rooted in primitive neural circuitry, are far harder to disregard. Yet the tradition holds

that the most accomplished practitioners, and certainly the fully awakened, remain undisturbed by ill will or hostility even when confronted with bodily danger:

> "Even were bandits savagely to sever you limb from limb with a two-handled saw, he who entertained hate in his heart on that account would not be one who carried out my teaching. Now this is how you should train herein: 'Our minds will remain unaffected, and we shall utter no bad words, and we shall abide compassionate for welfare with a mind of loving-kindness and no inner hate. We shall abide with a mind of loving-kindness extending to that person, and we shall abide with an abundant, exalted, mind of loving-kindness, without hostility or ill-will, extending over the all-encompassing world as its supporting object.' That is how you should train yourselves."[13]
>
> *Kakacūpama Sutta*, MN 21

To construe the *Kakacūpama Sutta* as enjoining us to permit any violence to be done to us while merely responding with loving-kindness is to misunderstand the discourse profoundly: the Buddha encouraged his disciples to move away from harm when practical. The simile presupposes a multitude of bandits and an act of dismemberment already irrevocably underway. The teaching is not about the point at which one should flee or withdraw, but about the moment — and the manner — in which one must still love.

Holding the Contradiction

On the numerous occasions when thoughts of Sangharakshita's "unskilful behaviour" arose, I would, whenever I felt able, simply remain with the accompanying pain or discomfort, while attempting to hold him in my mind with loving-kindness and compassion.

I would tell myself: *"The Order members must themselves have found a way to live with whatever unease the controversy provokes; otherwise they would not have stayed. There must therefore be a way for me to continue to benefit from his teaching without aversion. Perhaps I am reacting from some unconscious conditioning, and ought either to think more creatively about the matter or else put it out of my mind altogether."*

Such reflections were habitual during the period when my knowledge of the controversies was still limited to what the official report disclosed. Gradually, however, through private conversations with other Triratna members, I learned of further allegations. At least once, the manner in which this additional information reached me carried a certain insidious quality, for some details I heard did not ring entirely true.

For example, one Order member I spoke with suggested that certain survivors had been "overly sensitive," were "making a fuss about nothing," or were suffering from mental-health difficulties — remarks strikingly at odds with the compassionate tone of the official report. I began to wonder whether some Order members were evading any serious confrontation with possible wrongdoing by dismissing the survivors as unreliable, attention-seeking, or psychologically unstable. If so, it would represent a remarkable feat of mental agility. We shall examine this phenomenon more closely in the chapter "Doctrinal Drifts."

Despite my concerns, at times when the conversation went down such routes I would find myself trying to agree with the Order member's point of view in a state of internal cognitive contortion.

Mitra

As time went on, I felt like I wanted to deepen my practice and commitment to my local Buddhist Centre, so I asked to become a Mitra. At my local Triratna Buddhist Centre, Mitra ceremonies take place in the shrine room. My own Mitra ceremony felt profoundly significant, affording me the opportunity to declare myself a Buddhist in the presence of friends, family and the community. Yet the very intensity of the happiness I felt that day only deepened the subsequent pain and cognitive dissonance when I came to grasp the full gravity of the allegations against Sangharakshita. Had I known then what I know now, I would not have chosen to become a Mitra.

Dharma Study Group

During the time I spent as a member of my local Triratna community, I was invited to join a Dharma study group. The company of my fellow students was enriching, and our discussions were often profoundly stimulating. Yet I increasingly found myself at variance with the prescribed study materials wherever Sangharakshita's interpretations diverged from the understanding I had formed through my own direct engagement with the Buddha's teachings.

This divergence occasionally produced perceptible tension between myself and the Order member leading the group. On a few occasions, including toward the very end, the disagreement became acute. Ultimately, it was the combination of my deepening reservations about Sangharakshita's presentation of the Dharma and the profound emotional distress I experienced while attempting to retain respect for him as a teacher — after learning the nature of some of the abuse he inflicted on others — that compelled me to leave the Triratna community.

The Dharma study groups within Triratna, with their exhaustive manuals and extensive supplementary reading lists, constitute intensely intellectual forums — arenas of vigorous discussion and, at times, outright debate. Enjoyable though these sessions could be, we were, in essence, intellectualising Buddhism in much the same manner as Sangharakshita himself had done.

I have since come to recognise that this is not the most fruitful way to encounter the Dharma. A modest degree of study can indeed be supportive, provided it is directed primarily toward the original sources — above all, the suttas themselves, which remain the paramount scriptural repository of the Buddha's teaching. Such study should ideally be carried out under the guidance of an advanced practitioner, independently of any textual commentary, leaving the students and the teacher free to make up their own minds about the source material without any prescribed commentary such as appears throughout the Mitra study materials. Beyond that, the real work lies simply in one's own sustained ethical and meditation practice, again without making a show of it with prescriptive textual commentaries. Again, this too should be undertaken under the guidance of an advanced teacher who embodies kindness, compassion, sympathy, and equanimity.

Sangharakshita often referred to himself as a *teacher* but without the capital T. This was his way of impliedly acknowledging that he was first a scholar and second a Buddhist. It would also be a way in which he often attempted to sidestep allegations of inappropriate relations with his disciples. His students chose him as their *Teacher* with a capital T, yet often without adequate inquiry as to his suitability as a Teacher of the Dharma, and the lack of a lineage of elders to hold him to account.

There are moments when consulting a scholarly commentator may prove clarifying, especially when a particular sutta feels opaque or when having trouble with meditation or ethical matters. What is unhelpful, however, is habitually setting the suttas aside in favour of elaborate re-interpretations, experimental innovations on a Western philosophical theme, or engaging in potentially complex re-programming around charged ethical issues such as abortion. One scholar's re-imagining is another scholar's misrepresentation. Given the manifold and divergent nature of our conditioned views, any confident assertion that "this is a superior way to present the Dharma" risks glossing over subtle yet vital details that the Buddha included precisely because they serve some practitioners even if they appear superfluous to others.

DOCTRINAL DRIFTS

A case study in scrutinising Sangharakshita's teachings

Sangharakshita is widely recognised for having fashioned what is commonly described as his own "particular presentation" of the Dharma, one that frequently incorporates concepts drawn from Western philosophy. Yet the Pāli Canon contains numerous passages in which the Buddha expressly declares his teaching to be fully disclosed, openly proclaimed, immediately verifiable, and free from any secret or esoteric dimension. The Buddha repeatedly cautions against misinterpreting or misappropriating his universal Dharma. The Pāli Suttas themselves present a self-sufficient, perfectly expounded, and complete body of teachings whose profundity requires no supplementary 'translation' or reinterpretation. The position taken here is therefore a clear predisposition in favour of the Pāli Canon — a predisposition, however, that is far from arbitrary.

Again and again, elements in Sangharakshita's presentation when examined against the Suttas, are seen to foster a subtle form of self-assertion or clinging to views. The elaborate ordination system of the Triratna Buddhist Order, for instance, actively promotes the desire for and the deliberate cultivation of a "higher self" — a notion diametrically opposed to the Buddha's central metaphor of *nibbāna* as the "blowing out" of the very process of selfing. Attachment to any form of self and attachment to views are both explicitly identified in the Suttas as antithetical to authentic practice.

Sangharakshita's characteristic approach is to offer ostensibly "positive" reformulations, often setting aside what he labels the Pāli Canon's "negative" tone and superimposing or substituting a more affirmative counterpart. This, however, betrays a fundamental misreading of the Buddha's intention: the so-called "negative" phrasing is not a defect to be corrected but a precise and deliberate medicine aimed at the uprooting of craving, conceit, and wrong view — the only reliable path to genuine liberation.

In his highly popular book *What the Buddha Taught*, Rahula frames this matter most clearly:

> "The Buddha's teaching on *Anatta*, No-Soul, or No-Self, should not be considered as negative or annihilistic. **Like Nirvana, it is Truth, Reality; and Reality cannot be negative. It is the false belief in a non-existing imaginary self that is negative**. The teaching on *Anatta* dispels the darkness of false beliefs, and produces the light of wisdom. It is not negative; as Asanga very aptly says: 'There is the fact of No-selfness' (*nairātmyastitā*)."[14]

Testimonies confirm that some of Sangharakshita's experiments in 'positive creativity' were attended by serious ethical and psychological abuse. One of the principal shortcomings of his teaching lies in its excessive emphasis on positivity and creativity often at the great expense of the vital discernment of when to let go.

In this chapter I shall first examine what the Buddha says in the Nikāyas about the reliability and completeness of the Dharma he proclaimed, and then turn to one of Sangharakshita's most celebrated "unique translations" with an assessment of its reliability in practice.

1. No Hidden or Esoteric Teachings: The "Closed Fist of a Teacher" (Ācariyamuṭṭhi)

The clearest statement that the Buddha held nothing back — no secret doctrines, no "inner" vs. "outer" teachings — comes from the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (DN 16), the discourse on his final days. Addressing Ānanda shortly before his passing, the Buddha declares:

> "I've taught the Dhamma without making any distinction between secret and public teachings. The Realised One doesn't have the closed fist of a tutor when it comes to the teachings."[15]
>
> *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, DN 16

This explicitly rejects any idea of concealed or reserved interpretations. The Buddha taught everything openly and completely; nothing is withheld for an elite or to be re-interpreted later. Interestingly, Triratna's ordination retreats have long been treated as confidential within the movement; participants and Order members are routinely instructed not to disclose what occurs, a practice that stands in direct contradiction to the Buddha's explicit rejection of any 'closed fist'.

2. The Dhamma Is "Clear, Open, Evident, and Free of Patchwork"

This exact phrase (Pāli: "*vippasanna, vivaṭa, pakāsita, anissita/apaṭicchanna"*) appears in many suttas (mostly *Majjhima* and *Aṅguttara Nikāyas*) when the Buddha describes how perfectly proclaimed his teaching is. The most prominent occurrences include:

"Bhikkhus, the Dhamma well proclaimed by me thus is clear, open, evident, and free of patchwork."[16] (as translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi)

or

"The teaching well-explained thus by me is clarified, revealed, illuminated, and stripped of patchwork."[17] (as translated by Bhikkhu Sujato)

Alagaddūpama Sutta, MN 22

Similar phrasing also appears in SN 12.22, etc. The phrase emphasises that the teaching is transparent, self-evident, internally consistent ("free of patchwork" means no contradictory or concealed elements), and requires no supplementary "secret" explanations or re-interpretations.

3. Warning Against Misinterpretation and Wrong Grasp

The strongest caution against misrepresenting or re-interpreting the Dhamma appears in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* (MN 22, *The Simile of the Snake*)[18]. The monk Ariṭṭha had developed his own unique interpretation of the Dharma:

"As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, those things called obstructions by the Blessed One are not able to obstruct one who engages in them."

The Buddha admonishes him for his wrong view:

"Misguided man, to whom have you ever known me to teach the Dhamma in that way? Misguided man, have I not stated in many ways how obstructive things are obstructions,

and how they are able to obstruct one who engages in them? I have stated that sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering and despair, and that the danger in them is still more. ...

"You, misguided man, by your wrong grasp have misrepresented us, injured yourself, and stored up much demerit; for this will lead to your harm and suffering for a long time."

He then gives two famous similes: If one grasps a snake by the tail (wrong view or wrong interpretation) then the snake will bite you. However, grasping it by the neck (right view or right understanding) is safe. The Buddha then goes on to deliver the raft simile: The Dharma is like a raft for crossing the flood of suffering, not for clinging to or re-fashioning into something permanent or speculative.

"When you know the Dhamma to be similar to a raft, you should abandon even the teachings, how much more so things contrary to the teachings."

This sutta directly warns that distorting or re-interpreting the Buddha's words (even with good intentions) is dangerous and misrepresents the Tathāgata himself.

4. The Six Qualities of the Well-Proclaimed Dhamma (Svākkhāta Dhamma)

This formula is recited many times in the Canon:

"The Dhamma is well proclaimed (*svākkhāta*) by the Blessed One, visible here and now (*sandiṭṭhika*), immediately effective (*akālika*), inviting inspection (*ehipassika*), onward leading (*opanayika*), to be experienced by the wise for themselves (*paccattaṃ veditabbo viññūhi*)."[19]

Vatthasutta, MN 7

These qualities collectively mean the teaching is:

- Clearly and perfectly expounded (no ambiguity requiring later "clarification").
- Directly visible in this life (not metaphysical or esoteric).
- Immediately effective when practiced.
- Open to investigation ("come and see" — not "believe blindly").
- Leads directly to the goal.
- Verified individually, not through authority or reinterpretation.

This is the Buddha's own "seal of approval" on the clarity and completeness of his own words.

Summary of the Buddha's Position

The Buddha repeatedly stresses that everything necessary for awakening has been openly taught, there is nothing hidden (DN 16). The Dharma is already perfectly clear and complete — there is no need for speculative reinterpretation (MN 22, and the "clear, open, evident …" phrase). Wrong grasp or misrepresentation of his words is harmful and distorts the teaching itself (MN 22).

These passages, together with their numerous parallels throughout the canon, form the definitive scriptural foundation for the Theravāda tradition's conviction that the Buddha's Dhamma is open, complete in itself, and to be taken exactly as proclaimed — requiring no hidden key, no supplementary esoteric doctrine, and no later reinterpretation. Any assertion of concealed meanings or obligatory re-reading stands in direct contradiction to these explicit declarations.

However, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna have honoured the Buddha's restrictions on reinterpretation only superficially and rhetorically, while systematically overriding them through the doctrines of skilful means (*upāya*) and provisional (*neyārtha*) versus definitive (*nītārtha*) teachings. The Lotus Sutra itself openly declares — most vividly in the burning-house parable of Chapter 3 — that the earlier three vehicles were deliberate expedient lies told to lure beings out of the burning house of *saṃsāra*, only for the Buddha to later reveal the One Buddha Vehicle as the sole ultimate truth that had been withheld until disciples were ready; this is a direct repudiation of the "no closed fist" declaration in DN 16. Nāgārjuna, Tsongkhapa, and Vajrayāna traditions all insist their teachings merely make explicit what was already implicit, yet in practice they massively expanded the canon, introduced new doctrines (such as *tathāgatagarbha* or buddha-nature, deity yoga, pure-vision mandalas), and relegated large portions of the early teachings to provisional or inferior status, thereby departing profoundly from the Pāli Canon's insistence on a clear, complete, and non-reinterpretable Dhamma.

As to Sangharakshita's position however, and therefore that of Triratna:

> "[T]he historical Buddha is the touchstone of the whole tradition, whether as regards doctrine or imagery. In the case of the teachings the touchstone is the Buddha's words as found in the earliest Suttas. Whatever doctrines evolved later ... should be tested against the basic teachings found in the early records, especially, although not solely, in the Pāli Canon."[20]

It lies at the very heart of the Buddha's Dhamma that it is superbly proclaimed, directly visible here and now, timelessly effective, calling one to come and see, on-

ward-leading, and to be personally realised by the discerning. It is by nature luminous, open, self-evident, seamless, and free from all clinging. Consequently, **any purported "unique translation" of the Buddha's teaching is to be regarded with the deepest suspicion. It must be subjected to the most rigorous personal verification, in conjunction with the earliest of the Buddha's teachings, by anyone who would actually put it into practice. Failing to do so risks being bitten by a poisonous snake.**

In the chapter "Entering the Fold", we encountered what I earnestly hope is an uncommon instance of an Order member achieving reconciliation with Sangharakshita's ethical misconduct through the disparagement of those who suffered from it. There are, without question, many other perspectives within the Order, and I trust that most are markedly more compassionate than the one I have discerned here. Yet I propose that any position which preserves devotion while acknowledging the gravity of such ethical transgression as is revealed in the actual testimonies of his victims must have required a remarkable degree of intellectual ingenuity to resolve the profound dissonance between the teacher's conduct and the ideals he taught. Fixating on carefully curated official reports that misrepresent the situation propagates delusion through ignorance and craving for a more worthy teacher.

Mind: Reactive and Creative — A Personal Experience

Sangharakshita's 1967 talk titled "Mind: Reactive and Creative"[21] was something I had studied on a short course at my local Triratna Centre and it was something I was actively developing in my practice. Here I provide some important passages from his 1967 talk that had a strong effect on me personally, following which I shall discuss how such concepts affected me when 'holding the contradiction':

> "Relative mind … is of two kinds … and these are what I have called … reactive mind and … creative mind. Now I must make it clear that **these are not traditional Buddhist terms**. …

We have ... to re-present, to re-phrase, Buddhism, and this is certainly necessary. So this is ... an example, or at least an attempt, of such a rephrasing; because ... **we don't find these terms — reactive mind and creative mind — in traditional Buddhism. But it does seem to me that these two terms ... taken together, do express very well, very accurately, and ... very vividly, what the Buddha had in mind.** ...

"So it's with the awareness ... that we are not aware that the spiritual life begins. When we become aware of how conditioned we are, how reactive our minds are, how we're just like tiny puppets ...

"Then we may say not only spiritual life but even human life begins. **One is not really human until one has at least a modicum, at least a seed, at least a shoot, of awareness. It's that which really differentiates us from the animals. We may be well fed, we may be well clothed, we may watch the television set every night, but if we don't have awareness, then we're not really human after all.** ...

"Suppose some misfortune befalls us. We lost something or we're bereft of something. Something happens. Maybe something tragic which we don't like; so what usually happens? Usually of course ... we complain ... `Why should it be me, why should this happen to me?' So this is the reactive mind. This is the way we react if ... we're unaware. But **suppose we take that misfortune, that bereavement or that loss as a sort of challenge, as a sort of opportunity for unfolding something from within ourselves which is not determined by that object, then this is the creative mind in operation**. The reactive mind does tend to be ... negative and pessimistic, but the creative mind ... is positive, and it is optimistic ... in the sense that the **creativity persists despite even quite unpleasant external conditions and stimuli.** ...

"**Now this creativity ... can also extend ... to personal relationships, as when two people meet or in communication between them give birth to something which is more, something which is greater, than themselves.**"

I agree with the idea that the mind itself is of central concern in the Buddha's teaching. Sangharakshita's examples of misfortune, bereavement, and loss are entirely appropriate contexts in which to cultivate a 'creative' rather than a merely reactive response, though the Buddha would have put it more clearly in terms of the identification and letting go of unwholesome or unskilful mental states and the cultivation of wholesome or skilful mental states.

My difficulty with Mind: Reactive and Creative arises, rather, with the extension of the principle of applying the idea of "optimistic creativity", without any overt assessment of its ethical quality (skilful/unskilful), to every situation in which reactivity is possible. It is this universal application of "optimistic creativity despite unpleasant external conditions", I suggest, that opens the door to serious problems — where discomfort is endured out of spiritual necessity. In what follows I shall try to clarify my concerns by reference to the Buddha's own words.

From Sangharakshita's teaching I absorbed the clear message that any response which is not creative proceeds from an animal-like, conditioned reflex within an undeveloped mind. To be truly human, still more to be spiritual, one must meet every situation creatively. At the same time, senior Order members repeatedly counselled me to "hold the contradiction" (unpleasant conditions) and to accept that others further along the Path were already able to do this consistently. It seemed to me, therefore, entirely reasonable to conclude that even deeply disturbing matters — such as grave doubts about the ethical conduct of one's own teacher — could and

should be met with the same optimistically creative attitude.

In retrospect, I see this as a profoundly unhelpful inference when measured against the Buddha's advice in discourses such as the *Vanapattha Sutta* (MN 17, Jungle Thickets):

> "Take [the] case of a mendicant who lives supported by an individual. Their mindfulness does not become established ... But the necessities of life are easy to come by. That mendicant should reflect: '... my mindfulness does not become established ... But the necessities of life are easy to come by.' ... That mendicant should, after appraisal, leave that individual having taken leave; they should not follow them."[22]

Despite the sutta being literally about lay patronage, I nevertheless understood the *Vanapattha Sutta* as permitting a legitimate extension to conditions in general, including the teacher-disciple relationship. Had I been willing to recognise my persistent unease and troubling thoughts about Sangharakshita's ethical misconduct as nothing more than evidence that "my mindfulness was not becoming established," I might have reached the conclusion far sooner that it was wise to discontinue following his teachings.

Such insight would also have been supported by other suttas such as the *Vīmaṃsaka Sutta* (MN 47, The Inquirer) where the Buddha encourages his monks to investigate whether he exhibits any unwholesome states that would undermine their faith in him as their teacher:

> "Does [this venerable one] avoid indulging in sensual pleasures because he is without lust through the destruction of lust?"[23]

On the interpretation of the Dharma that was being taught by Sangharakshita, my understanding was also hampered by my ignorance of another crucial instruction of the Buddha in the *Sandaka Sutta* (MN 76, To Sandaka):

> "Take another teacher who relies on logic and inquiry. They teach what they have worked out by logic, following a line of inquiry, expressing their own perspective. But when a teacher relies on logic and inquiry, some of that is well reasoned, some poorly reasoned, some true, and some otherwise.
>
> "A sensible person reflects on this matter in this way: 'This teacher relies on logic and inquiry. They teach what they have worked out by logic, following a line of inquiry, expressing their own perspective. But when a teacher relies on logic and inquiry, some of that is well reasoned, some poorly reasoned, some true, and some otherwise. This spiritual life is unreliable.' Realising this, they leave disappointed."[24]

As a purely philosophical construct, Sangharakshita's distinction between the reactive and the creative mind possesses some merit and is readily accessible as a practice of sorts. Yet we must not overlook his own candid admission near the beginning of the talk:

> "We don't find these terms — reactive mind and creative mind — in traditional Buddhism."

He claims to know what the Buddha "had in mind." In the Buddha's own terminology, this is plainly "relying on logic and inquiry" and "expressing one's own perspective" — the very basis, the Buddha warns, for an unreliable spiritual life. It is therefore hardly surprising that, when I attempted to apply the "creative mind" to the pain arising from the controversies surrounding Sangharak-

shita, the approach eventually proved inadequate, leaving me disappointed and ultimately compelled to leave.

To many Order members, and perhaps to some Mitras, such criticism of one of Sangharakshita's most celebrated innovations may at first seem inapplicable to their own experience. Yet the Buddha does not say that a teaching founded on personal inference is *always* wrong; he says it is *unreliable*. The distinction is crucial, and the Buddha weighed his words with utmost precision.

I have already acknowledged that the creative-mind approach works well in certain cases and for certain individuals. The Buddha, however, never taught it — precisely because it is not a universal remedy, not a part of the universal Buddha Dharma.

Some people are indeed able to think creatively enough, and to hold their understanding of the controversies with sufficient steadiness, that the resulting mind states enable them to remain within the movement insufficiently disturbed to have to leave. Others are not. That is exactly what the Buddha means by "unreliable."

Mind: Reactive and Creative — Objective Concerns

The preceding reflections have stemmed from my own attempts to apply the principles set forth in "Mind: Reactive and Creative" as a means of "holding the contradiction." This will not, however, correspond to every practitioner's experience or interpretation. What follows is therefore offered as an objective critical examination of the lecture, with particular regard to the difficulties that some members of the Triratna community may encounter when seeking to employ Sangharakshita's recommended approaches while endeavouring to hold the profound contradiction of continuing to follow a teacher who was a serial predatory abuser.

In the spirit of objectivity, let us first summarise the lecture to establish a clear foundation for critique. Drawing from foundational Buddhist texts like the Dhammapada and Zen verses, he positions the mind as the core starting point of all Buddhist traditions, emphasising its role in generating suffering or happiness based on purity or impurity. He differentiates between the "Absolute Mind" — a non-dual, luminous awareness equated with ultimate reality and Enlightenment — and the "relative mind," which operates in everyday individual experience. The lecture's innovation lies in rephrasing traditional concepts into two modes of this relative mind: the "reactive mind" (conditioned by external stimuli, mechanical, unaware, repetitive, and akin to a machine or puppet) and the "creative mind" (spontaneous, free, aware, original, and productive from inner depths). Symbolic illustrations include the Wheel of Life (representing reactive cycles of ignorance, craving, and hatred via its hub, segments, realms, and twelve *nidanas*) versus the Path or Spiral (an upward progression toward Enlightenment, exemplified by the Seven Bodhyangas starting with mindfulness).

Sangharakshita seeks to bridge Eastern philosophy with Western sensibilities, using examples — such as reacting to advertisements or political biases — to demystify abstract ideas. Attempts at humour (e.g., labelling purely reactive individuals as "humanoids") and practical warnings against routinising spiritual practices may encourage self-reflection and vitality in one's path. The talk ostensibly aligns with core Buddhist principles like dependent origination and the primacy of awareness, and he encourages practitioners to view challenges as opportunities for growth rather than mere reactions.

Yet, these merits are tempered by notable weaknesses. The binary "reactive vs. creative" dichotomy, while

vivid, oversimplifies nuanced Buddhist psychology found in texts like the Abhidharma, where mind is dissected into aggregates and factors without such a stark split. This could mislead students into perceiving spiritual progress as a simplistic toggle, undervaluing the gradual, interdependent nature of insight practices. Sangharakshita's optimism about the creative mind as "freedom itself" and "ceaseless productivity" idealises the process, potentially downplaying persistent reactive tendencies even among advanced practitioners. Moreover, his relegation of "conventional morality and conventional religion" to reactive realms risks fostering ethical relativism, where precepts might be dismissed as secondary, opening doors to justifications for misconduct under the banner of transcending norms.

These critiques become particularly poignant when considering the difficulties faced by Sangharakshita's students in applying his approaches while "holding the contradiction" of his ethical misconduct. Reports from credible sources, including The Guardian (2017)[25], BBC investigations (2016)[26], and Triratna's internal reviews[27], detail accusations of coercive sexual relationships with young male followers in the 1970s-1980s, often framed as spiritual guidance amid power imbalances and emotional manipulation. While Triratna has issued apologies and reforms, ongoing testimonies (e.g., in books like Robert M. Ellis's 2022 analysis[28] and community forums[29][30][31]) highlight lingering trauma and debates over minimisation.

For students, cultivating awareness (*smriti*) as the entry to creative mind demands unflinching honesty, yet reconciling Sangharakshita's actions — which appear rooted in reactive craving and ignorance — creates cognitive dissonance. How can one trust teachings on non-reactivity when the teacher seemingly exemplified it?

Analysing mental states (*dharma-pravicaya*) might reveal internal conflicts as valid signals to depart, echoing the *Vanapattha Sutta's* advice to leave unhelpful supports. However, the lecture's emphasis on creative responses to "misfortune" could subtly encourage reframing abuse as a personal growth challenge, suppressing doubts as mere reactivity and perpetuating loyalty at the cost of well-being.

In personal relationships, the ideal of birthing something "greater than themselves" takes on ironic weight given the history of exploitative dynamics. Later we will learn how Mark Dunlop, one of the most outspoken survivors of Sangharakshita's abuse "found Sangharakshita's teaching to be a kind of poison, "[32] ironically apt given Sangharakshita's "wrong-grasp".

Students might fear replicating such patterns in sangha interactions, where historical norms blurred boundaries. Manipulative patterns that should be considered misconduct may be permitted as "creative skilful means". The talk's dismissal of conventional ethics as reactive exacerbates moral ambiguity: confronting misconduct could feel unspiritual, leading to denial or factionalism rather than true creativity. For some, this unreliability — as the *Sandaka Sutta* warns of teachings based on personal logic — manifests in burnout or disillusionment, underscoring why the Buddha avoided such neologisms. **While the framework aids many in everyday scenarios, its application to profound ethical contradictions proves precarious, highlighting the need for cross-traditional perspectives to ensure a path that is aware, ethical, and truly liberating.**

A NEW SOCIETY?

Assessing Sangharakshita's goal to grow a new society around his vision, its relation to traditional Buddhism and the potential for the emergence of cult-like traits and abuse.

In his 1976 talk, "The Nucleus of a New Society,"[33] Sangharakshita outlines the founding and purpose of the FWBO which later became Triratna. Delivered autobiographically, the talk recounts his spiritual journey in India, his return to England amid controversy, and his vision for a new Buddhist movement adapted to the West.

He positions the FWBO as offering four key elements to modern society: a method of personal development (meditation leading to integration, inspiration, permeation, and radiation), a vision of human existence (conditioned arising via cyclical/reactive vs. spiral/creative modes), and crucially, itself as the "nucleus" of a new society. This nucleus emphasises spiritual commitment through "Going for Refuge" to the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha), rather than mere membership. He describes a tiered structure — Friends (regular participants), Mitras (those with a devotional link), Order Members (ordained via private and public ceremonies), and Kalyana Mitras (spiritual mentors) — aimed at fostering individual growth within a community free from constraints like subscriptions or rigid monasticism.

The talk concludes by contrasting this "spiritual community" (based on shared ideals and creative mind) with the "old society" (groups based on needs, competition,

and reactive mind), advocating transformation toward a higher, more enlightened collective.

Analysis from a Traditional Buddhist Perspective

Sangharakshita's talk ostensibly aligns with several core Buddhist principles while introducing adaptations that attempt a modernist, Western-oriented interpretation of the Dharma. At its heart, the lecture emphasises the FWBO as a "nucleus of a new society," positioning it as a sangha (spiritual community) that embodies giving (*dāna*), personal transformation, and collective commitment to the Buddha's teachings. This resonates with traditional Buddhism's Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha), where the Sangha (the living community and historical noble teachers) is seen as essential for supporting individual practice and societal harmony.

Sangharakshita's recounting of personal development through meditation — framed as stages of integration, inspiration, permeation, and radiation — mirrors the progressive path in Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions, such as the stages of insight (*vipassanā*) or the bodhisattva path, drawing from texts like the Diamond Sutra and Huineng's Platform Sutra, which he cited as pivotal in his awakening. The distinction between "reactive" and "creative" minds echoes the Buddha's teachings on conditioned existence (*pratītyasamutpāda*), with cyclical conditionality representing *saṃsāra* (the wheel of suffering) and spiral conditionality symbolising the exit point toward nirvana.

However, critically, Sangharakshita's approach introduces innovations that diverge from orthodox Buddhist structures. He critiques existing Western Buddhist groups for superficial engagement — e.g., not practicing vegetarianism or Right Livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*) — which aligns with the Vinaya (monastic code) and ethical pre-

cepts (*sila*), but his solution of founding a new Order based on personal commitment rather than mere subscription risks elitism.

Traditional Sanghas, like the Theravāda bhikkhu community, emphasise ordination under strict vows and hierarchical oversight, often tied to cultural contexts. The WBO — Sangharakshita's spiritual Order — by contrast, appears more fluid and lay-oriented, blending monastic and household elements, which could be praised as skilful means (*upāya*) for adapting Dharma to the West but criticised for potentially diluting Vinaya rules or creating a syncretic form that prioritises his vision over canonical authority.

His autobiographical narrative positions him as a bridge between Eastern authenticity and Western needs, invoking his initiations from Tibetan teachers, yet this self-presentation undervalues collective lineage in favour of individual charisma, a shift from the Buddha's emphasis on the Dharma as teacher (e.g., in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*).

Overall, the ideas promote practice and community-building, ostensibly substantiated by Buddhist ethics, but they reflect a reformist stance that could be seen as culturally appropriative or overly personalised, potentially straying from the Middle Way by overemphasising organisational novelty.

Analysis from the Perspective of Potential for Emergence of Cult-like Tendencies

In later chapters I establish a formal academic framework for the assessment of cult-like traits in some of Triratna's later materials. For the purposes of A New Society I will just perform an overview analysis of the potential for the emergence of cult-like tendencies.

Sangharakshita's ideas, while rooted in Buddhist community-building, exhibit several features that could foster cult-like dynamics, particularly through charismatic leadership, in-group exclusivity, and demands for total commitment. He frames the FWBO as a "new society" offering itself as the ultimate gift — echoing Walt Whitman's "When I give, I give myself" — which positions the organisation (and implicitly himself as founder) as indispensable for spiritual growth.

This narrative creates an "us vs. them" dichotomy: existing Buddhist groups are portrayed as ineffective or corrupted (e.g., infiltrated by non-Buddhists or lacking serious practice), while the FWBO/WBO is the "real" Sangha requiring full life changes, such as altering jobs, diets, and social lives. Such binary framing is a common cult marker, encouraging isolation from mainstream society or other Buddhists, as described in his account of returning to England despite warnings of danger and closed doors, casting opponents as threats and his followers as a loyal remnant.

Critically, the emphasis on commitment over subscription — joining only by "committing oneself to the ideals" — could evolve into high-control mechanisms, where loyalty is tested through retreats, classes, and lifestyle shifts, potentially leading to dependency on the group. His autobiography amplifies this: he depicts himself as a persecuted visionary (e.g., the "bolt from the blue" uninvitation, fears of murder), a trope in cult formation that mythologises the leader as a martyr-hero, fostering unquestioning admiration.

The lack of mention of democratic governance or external accountability in the talk — focusing instead on his personal decisions and visions — suggests a top-down structure, where the founder's experiences (e.g., Himalayan initiations) legitimise authority. Invoking a lineage

whilst distancing leaders from oversight by that lineage risks corruption. While not inherently cultish (many religions have charismatic founders), this setup has potential for abuse if unchecked, as it discourages dissent and promotes the group as the sole path to enlightenment. Substantiated examples from similar movements (e.g., Osho/Rajneesh or Jonestown) show how such narratives can escalate to totalism, though here it is supposedly mitigated by Buddhist ethics. Nonetheless, the talk's tone risks cultivating insularity, where "taking Buddhism seriously" becomes synonymous with unwavering allegiance to the FWBO.

Analysis from the Potential for Arising of Sexual or Psychological Abuse

The ideas in Sangharakshita's talk raise concerns about power imbalances that could enable sexual or psychological abuse, particularly in a hierarchical, commitment-heavy community led by a charismatic figure. He advocates for a Sangha where members undergo profound internal and external changes, guided by classes, retreats, and close interactions — settings that, while beneficial for growth, can (and did) blur boundaries between teacher and student.

His role as founder and primary teacher, underscored by his claims to extensive Eastern credentials and personal "glimpse of the Transcendental," creates a guru-like dynamic, where vulnerability is encouraged (e.g., sharing in groups, meditation-induced openness) without explicit safeguards mentioned. In Buddhist traditions, such relationships are ideally governed by precepts against misconduct (e.g., the third precept on sexual ethics), but the talk's focus on "giving oneself totally" could be (and likely was) interpreted to justify exploitative be-

haviours, especially if the leader is seen as enlightened or beyond reproach.

Critically, the potential for psychological abuse emerges from the pressure to conform: critiquing non-vegetarians or those not practicing Right Livelihood implies shaming or exclusion for non-compliance, which might lead to guilt, anxiety, or manipulation under the guise of "serious practice." Sexual abuse risks are heightened in isolated retreat environments or single-sex communities, where power differentials amplify.

Historical parallels in Buddhist groups (e.g., scandals in Zen or Tibetan lineages involving teacher-student relations) substantiate this: unchecked authority can lead to coercion, rationalised as "skilful means" or tantric practices, though Sangharakshita doesn't explicitly invoke tantra here. His all-male early experiences (e.g., wandering as a *sādhu*) and the FWBO's later problems highlight how such structures might enable grooming or unequal relationships.

Mitigating factors include the emphasis on ethical living and non-violence, but the talk lacks discussion of consent, oversight, or grievance mechanisms, leaving room for abuse if the "nucleus" prioritises loyalty over accountability. While the ideas seem to promote positive transformation, they also create fertile ground for exploitation without built-in protections.

Walt Whitman's Poem Song of Myself

Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" (from the 1892 edition of *Leaves of Grass*) is a sprawling, 52-section epic that celebrates the individual self as an expansive, democratic force intertwined with the cosmos, nature, and humanity. Sangharakshita paraphrases a line from section 40 — "Behold, I do not give lectures or a little charity, / When I give I give myself" — to illustrate "real

giving" as total self-bestowal, which he contrasts with partial offerings like time or money. This resonates with his Buddhist emphasis on *dāna* (generosity) as an essential virtue, but it also reveals his interpretive lens: drawing from Western Romanticism to frame Buddhist community-building.

From a Buddhist perspective, the poem's themes can be examined through the lenses of *anattā* (no-self) and surrender (often akin to letting go or *upekkhā*/equanimity). While Whitman's work is not Buddhist, its pantheistic, boundary-dissolving vision offers intriguing parallels to doctrines in Theravāda (e.g., impermanence) and Mahāyāna (e.g., interdependence and emptiness), though it diverges in its affirmative embrace of worldly multiplicity rather than transcendence.

From a Buddhist standpoint, "Song of Myself" poetically approximates no-self through its de-centred, universal self and surrender via generous immersion in life's flux, perhaps resonating more with Mahāyāna non-duality than with a strict Theravāda analysis. However, it affirms the vitality of *saṃsāra* rather than seeking its end, making it a tempting but incomplete parallel.

Sangharakshita's choice of this quote in 1976 reveals a creative mindset: blending Whitman's Romantic expansiveness with Buddhist *dāna* to inspire a "new society," suggesting this is necessary to make Dharma accessible in the West, perhaps also to attract intellectually creative thinkers like himself. This fusion underscores his reformist approach — valuing his own ideas over orthodoxy — but also highlights potential tensions, as Whitman's ego-celebration might subtly reinforce the very self-clinging Buddhism aims to uproot.

Song of Myself — Sexuality and Desire

Taking the examination of Song of Myself further, the work has a lot to say about sexuality and desire, forming imagery which is entirely out of keeping with traditional Buddhist values. The free exploration of unrestrained sexuality is strongly discouraged in traditional Buddhism as being the source of overpowering emotional forces productive of much unsatisfactoriness.

The following excerpts highlight Whitman's frank celebration of the human body, desires, physical intimacy, and the rejection of societal taboos.

Always the procreant urge of the world. / Out of the dimness opposite equals advance, always substance and increase, always sex, / Always a knit of identity, always distinction, always a breed of life.

This quote directly celebrates sexuality as an essential, life-affirming force in the universe, reflecting Whitman's belief in embracing desires as part of living fully and challenging norms that view sex as taboo.

Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean, / Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest.

Here, Whitman affirms the beauty and equality of all body parts, using sensual language to liberate the human form from shame, encouraging self-acceptance and exploration.

And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers, / And that a kelson of the creation is love.

This illustrates Whitman's inclusive view of intimacy, blending familial and erotic bonds across genders, which provokes societal norms by portraying love as foundational to human existence.

Copulation is no more rank to me than death is. / I believe in the flesh and the appetites, / Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle.

Whitman equates sexual acts with natural processes like death, celebrating bodily appetites as miraculous and using vivid imagery to challenge repression, promoting a fulfilling life through satiation of physical desires.

If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of my own body, or any part of it, / Translucent mould of me it shall be you! / ... / Firm masculine colter it shall be you! / ... / You my rich blood! your milky stream pale strippings of my life! / Breast that presses against other breasts it shall be you! / My brain it shall be your occult convolutions! / ... / Mix'd tussled hay of head, beard, brawn, it shall be you! / Trickling sap of maple, fibre of manly wheat, it shall be you! / ... / You sweaty brooks and dews it shall be you! / Winds whose soft-tickling genitals rub against me it shall be you! / Broad muscular fields, branches of live oak, loving lounger in my winding paths, it shall be you! / Hands I have taken, face I have kiss'd, mortal I have ever touch'd, it shall be you.

This evocative passage with homoerotic themes reveres the body and physical touch as sacred, with sensual details that liberate desires and underscore the poem's theme of authentic, embodied living.

To touch my person to some one else's is about as much as I can stand.

Capturing the intensity of physical intimacy, this quote highlights the overwhelming power of touch and desire, reflecting Whitman's provocative exploration of personal passions.

My lovers suffocate me, / Crowding my lips, thick in the pores of my skin, / Jostling me through streets and public halls, coming naked to me at night.

With vivid, erotic imagery of naked encounters and sensory overload, this supports the analysis by portraying sexuality as an all-encompassing, liberating force that defies societal constraints.

Given that Sangharakshita was enthusiastically quoting this very poem in the 1970s — the same decade in which his later sexual and psychological abuse was reported as having begun — readers may legitimately wonder whether his deep immersion in Whitman's uninhibited erotic vision may have shaped, or at least provided poetic sanction for, his own attitudes toward sexuality.

To cite lines from *Song of Myself* in a lecture intended to articulate the foundations of a new Buddhist movement is, at the least, questionable. At worst it is quite inappropriate. In a 1982 seminar (*A Survey of Buddhism*, Chapter 1, Sections 8-18)[34], when a participant proposed that Whitman represented an evolutionary step toward higher consciousness, Sangharakshita replied with characteristic wryness: "One might not, for instance, agree

that Walt Whitman was as enlightened as the Buddha [laughter], but nonetheless it's a movement in the same general direction."[35] This is Sangharakshita appealing to his supporters, cultivating like-minded individuals who would share his vision. Of course Walt Whitman's poetry is not a movement in the same general direction as the Buddha. It promotes sexual desire whilst the Buddha said cultivate the opposite. It may encourage the break-down of egoic dualistic thinking, but the manner in which it does this goes well beyond the boundaries necessary for mutual respect, especially when applied in an unequal partnership.

May this investigation serve as a reminder that when we open the sense-doors wide in the name of spiritual freedom, we would do well to know precisely what is echoing through them.

THE MYTH OF LINEAGE

Fabricated Authority and the Erosion of Socratic Doubt

The FWBO/Triratna has always presented itself as a fresh, ecumenical, "Western" expression of Buddhism that draws from multiple traditions without being bound to any single Eastern lineage. Officially, Triratna claims that the true lineage of Buddhism is not institutional but lies in the act of "Going for Refuge" to the Three Jewels. Critics, however, argue that this formulation conveniently sidesteps a more uncomfortable reality: the movement's authority and teachings can reliably be traced back only to Sangharakshita himself — and that his own claims to traditional training have been repeatedly challenged by respected teachers across Theravāda, Tibetan, and Zen traditions.

Theravāda Credentials Under Scrutiny

Sangharakshita spent roughly twenty years in India (1944-1964) and received ordination in the Theravāda tradition in 1950. Yet some senior Theravāda figures have dismissed the depth of his understanding. Ajahn Brahm, a widely respected monk in the Thai Forest Tradition, described one of Sangharakshita's books on Theravāda as "a misinformed and malicious attack on the Bhikkhu Sangha and the millions of laypeople who follow Theravāda Buddhism" and displaying "the misunderstandings of an outsider, one with little experience of the rich and beneficial lifestyles of both the bhikkhu and the layperson in the traditional Theravāda countries and now amongst Westerners following Theravāda, who ex-

perience an immensely powerful training in virtue, meditation, compassion and wisdom."[36]

The pre-eminent Western Buddhist scholar Bhikkhu Bodhi, in reviewing one of Sangharakshita's books, whilst praising its coverage of Mahāyāna Buddhism, wrote:

> "The opening chapter on "Buddhism and Language" contains several strictures against the Theravāda which may strike even an impartial reader as too severe, while the final chapter on "Continuing Revelation" will provoke some puzzled questions and critical reservations from a Theravādin."[37]

In accord with the assessments of distinguished Theravāda authorities, the impression I have derived from Sangharakshita's writings is that he frequently adopted a markedly patronising tone towards Theravāda Buddhism, especially in his earlier works. A representative instance appears in the following passage from *A Survey of Buddhism*:

> "Fully convinced that every one of their 220 rules was promulgated by the Buddha himself, they profess to insist upon rigid observance of the whole code. In practice this generally means that observance of the letter of the Vinaya is regarded as an end in itself. Exaggerated importance is attached to the observance of quite minor rules, while offences against the major precepts, provided they are committed quietly, pass unnoticed. More than once has the writer been told by monks from Sri Lanka that in that home of pristine Buddhism eating water midday is regarded as a more serious offence than indulging in sexual intercourse with a woman. We must admit with regret that in the Theravādin Buddhist countries the first kind of morality consisting in purity has de-

generated, a few noble exceptions apart, into the systematic practice of hypocrisy as one of the Buddhist fine arts, into an ostentatious parade of empty and meaningless ecclesiastical formalism of the most frivolous kind."[38]

His tone is sharply critical, contemptuous, and condemnatory. Although the passage opens with a neutral-sounding description ("fully convinced … profess to insist"), it quickly turns into overt scorn. **He systematically portrays Theravāda practice as:**

- **Legalistic and hollow**: observance of the Vinaya has become "an end in itself" and "empty and meaningless ecclesiastical formalism."
- **Hypocritical and inverted in moral priorities**: minor rules are treated with "exaggerated importance" while grave breaches of major precepts are ignored if done discreetly.
- **Absurd**: the extreme example of Sri Lankan monks allegedly considering eating after midday a graver offence than sexual intercourse is presented not as an isolated oddity but as symptomatic of the tradition's corruption.
- **Degenerate**: he states that genuine moral purity has "degenerated … into the systematic practice of hypocrisy as one of the Buddhist fine arts" and "an ostentatious parade … of the most frivolous kind."

The phrase "we must admit with regret" is not genuine sorrow or ambivalence; it is a rhetorical device that actually heightens the condemnation by implying that the deplorable state of affairs is so obvious that even insiders must concede it. The single phrase "hypocrisy as one of the Buddhist fine arts" is particularly venomous, redu-

cing an entire religious tradition to performative deceit elevated to an art form.

In short, he does not merely criticise specific abuses; he delivers a wholesale, withering indictment of contemporary Theravāda (especially in Sri Lanka) as corrupt, pharisaical, and a betrayal of authentic Buddhism. The tone is one of disdainful exposé, not balanced critique as one might expect in an objective 'Survey of Buddhism'.

Another example of his disdain for the Theravāda comes a little later in the book:

> "Owing to its inability to adapt itself to changing conditions the Theravāda disappeared from India earlier than most other schools; but it was successful in establishing itself in Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand, as well as in a few smaller states, in all of which countries the general level of intelligence and standard of spiritual culture were considerably lower than those of India. Having changed, about five hundred years after the *paranirvana* of the Blessed One, from an oral to a written tradition, it became the means of preserving until modern times a larger and more complete collection of primitive formulations of the teaching than any other school. Even unintelligent conservatism is not without its compensations! In this case, however, the compensations were of the historical rather than of the spiritual order. Theravāda Buddhism on the whole resembles the tombs of the Egyptian kings; faithfully embalming against decay the outward forms of spiritual life, it has not succeeded in preserving that life itself; its boasted immutability is the settled and frozen immutability of death."[39]

Statements such as "in Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand … the general level of intelligence and standard of spiritual culture were considerably lower than those of India" and "[e]ven unintelligent conservatism is not without its compensations!" stand as stark illustrations of

Sangharakshita's failure, in those passages, to write from a mind imbued with loving-kindness.

At best, he appears to have written without regard for how such words would be received by practitioners and others from those countries; at worst, they betray something approaching contempt for an entire Buddhist tradition.

The final remark, to one who cherishes the Pāli suttas of the Theravāda, is especially wounding. I have listened repeatedly to sublime recitations of the ancient discourses, and I never cease to find them radiant with life, mystery, and beauty; their cadences can transport the contemplative mind into realms hitherto unknown. It grieves me that Sangharakshita felt compelled to disparage the Theravāda in so unbalanced a fashion.

This early hostility appears to have cast a long shadow over the reputation of the Pāli suttas in certain Triratna circles. Among some Order members I encountered a muted but unmistakable aversion to the suttas, almost certainly rooted in Sangharakshita's earlier pronouncements and the ill-informed idea that they are "negative". While Triratna's ecumenical ethos may have contributed, the overt disparagement he sometimes displayed toward the Theravāda could readily be taken as licence to belittle the Pāli canon whenever it proved inconvenient.

A few pages later in the same *Survey of Buddhism*, Sangharakshita strikes a markedly different note:

> "Let us go southward to Sri Lanka, for centuries the stronghold of Theravāda, where even now are to be found the most intelligent and cultured exponents of this ancient school"[40]

The contrast is striking. In the first passages he implies that the general intelligence and spiritual culture of Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand fall noticeably below those of India; in the second he celebrates Sri Lanka as home to "the most intelligent and cultured exponents" of the Theravāda. The tonal shift is pronounced, and the two statements sit uneasily together, betraying, in my view, a want of consistency in either presentation or underlying perspective.

Triratna has acknowledged that Sangharakshita's "particular presentation" of the Dharma evolved throughout his life. In the paper "Revering and Relying upon the Dharma: Sangharakshita's Approach to Right View"[41], Subhuti writes:

> "We must ... always read his earlier teachings in the light of his later. This does not by any means require us to discard his earlier material — for instance, burning any book in which he uses terminology borrowed from the German Idealists, like 'The Absolute', which he now eschews. Nor yet does it require us to cut out the entire Mahāyāna, because he now finds some of its metaphysicising problematically reified, despite his earlier use of it. What it implies is that we should have a good understanding of his most recent perspective when we look at his earlier work and read or listen to it accordingly. And, of course, his disciples should take great care in how they themselves use that earlier material in their own practice."[42]

In his earlier writings Sangharakshita employed the term "Hīnayāna" when referring to the Buddha's original teaching — a term meaning "lesser vehicle" and one that, as I noted at the outset of this book, many now find objectionable because of its frequently pejorative use. Consider this characteristic passage:

"Having identified Truth with its conceptual formulations, it was not long before Hinayanists took the next step of equating the conceptual formulations of Truth with their verbal expressions and, after the oral tradition had been committed to writing — an unmistakable sign of spiritual deterioration — with the very letters of the written text."[43]

Here Sangharakshita warns against reducing the living Dharma to written form, seeing in that act a symptom of decline — yet ironically he himself produced an immense corpus of books, many transcribed from his own lectures, and sanctioned a highly textual Mitra study course within the movement he founded. Triratna has in some respects become a shrine to his perceived intellectual prowess 'having identified Truth with Sangharakshita's own conceptual formulations.'

To his earlier coolness toward Theravāda may be added a lingering resentment over his treatment by the English Sangha Trust. Shortly after his death, an Order member who had known him intimately gave a talk entitled "The Qualities of My Teacher Sangharakshita" (available on YouTube), in which he recounted:

"There was a time when [Sangharakshita had] come back to England at the request of the English Sangha Trust and then they began to act very badly towards him. That ... really hurt him ... . We don't often think about ... the fact that some of the things that people have done and said to him ... hurt him and that hurt him quite a lot ... , and I know that because twice I've been with him and when he [started] talking about those times he used to get really exercised. There was one time he was sitting there; he just got up and he was walking up and down the room ... saying 'Who do they think they are! Who do they think they are to do this!' and he was just really

really walking up and down there, really exercised and I thought: 'All that really really hurt you.'"[44]

The speaker's vivid description — Sangharakshita pacing, voice rising (in the video the speaker also gesticulates with his fist pumping) — conveys a raw, enduring wound. We may therefore need to read many of Sangharakshita's harsher remarks about Theravāda in the light of that unresolved pain. Such anecdotes also suggest Sangharakshita had a high opinion of himself and was not one to bow to authority. Such characteristics likely only encouraged the development of his personal interpretation of the Dharma.

Later in life, while not explicitly retracting his critique of certain Theravāda practices, Sangharakshita placed increasing emphasis on the Pāli suttas themselves. In the interview "In Retrospect: A Conversation with Sangharakshita"[45], he explicitly directs his disciples to the Pāli scriptures as the touchstone for resolving any ambiguity in his own public positions:

Interviewer: "One outcome of your sexual orientation and your decision to engage in sexual activity has been that ... there are some women who consider that your view of women and your ability to relate to women is in some way affected, that you have a natural tendency to favour men, to idealise men in a way that you don't have with women."

Sangharakshita: "I find that rather laughable. Due to my activities in the course of the last so many years dealing with people, I don't have the slightest tendency to idealise men, even those who have been quite close to me. I think I see them quite clearly. And of course I don't idealise women either. I see women as human beings and treat them as such just as I see men as human beings and treat them as such. I

don't think that any woman who has ever come to see me individually can complain that I didn't listen to her or discuss things with her in an open and sympathetic manner."

Interviewer: "But maybe that comes back to that issue of sometimes a seeming discrepancy between your public position and a more intimate private position in so far as there are statements that people find in seminars that you've given."

Sangharakshita: "My public position is the Buddhist tradition. Let people read the Pāli scriptures."

In passing, we should note that when confronted with the idea that some women were concerned about his views towards women, he unsympathetically shuts the idea down as being "rather laughable," yet he goes on to say that no woman can complain that he hadn't been open and sympathetic towards her!

His emphasis on the Pāli is echoed in one of the Order's foundational documents "A supra-personal force or energy working through me"[46] by Subhuti in conversation with Sangharakshita:

"Since [the Pāli canon or other equivalent sources] ... are the most historically reliable accounts we have of what the Buddha actually said and did, to go beyond their evidence is to stray into fiction."[47]

We also have this, from the Order document "Re-Imagining the Buddha" at page 31. Whilst discouraging outright fundamentalism:

"Sangharakshita considers that the historical Buddha is the touchstone of the whole tradition, whether as regards doctrine or imagery. In the case of the teachings the touch-

stone is the Buddha's words as found in the earliest Suttas. Whatever doctrines evolved later ... should be tested against the basic teachings found in the early records, especially, although not solely, in the Pāli Canon."

One doctrine that evolved later was Sangharakshita's own teachings so, by his own guidance, his own teachings must be similarly tested.

Respect All Traditions

In light of Sangharakshita's later insistence on the paramount importance of the Pāli Canon, and given his unmistakable early bias against Theravāda, **it is essential that those who continue to practise within Triratna actively cultivate respect for all Buddhist traditions**. A dismissive or derogatory attitude towards other lineages can only discourage practitioners from engaging with the profound and abundant resources those traditions offer.

Tibetan and Vajrayāna Authority Denied

Sangharakshita also claimed significant Tibetan training, particularly under teachers such as Dhardo Rinpoche, Dudjom Rinpoche, and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. Yet Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche — one of the most prominent Tibetan lamas teaching in the West at the time — stated flatly in the mid-1960s that Sangharakshita had "definitely received no higher initiations, unless by false pretences."[48] Stephen Batchelor, himself a former Gelug monk and a leading secular Buddhist writer, has pointed out that Sangharakshita never received formal authorisation from any recognised lama to teach Vajrayāna, and that his failure to invite Dudjom or Khyentse Rinpoche to his London centre when they visited

Britain in the 1970s was, in Tibetan terms, "an unforgivable breach of protocol:"

> "Sangharakshita is in a difficult position. If he did say he was officially endorsed by a lineage, then he'd have to go along with it and tie himself into that camp. On the other hand, he can't deny he has a connection with Asian traditions; otherwise his whole edifice would be built on sand. He has no real authority from any lamas. But if he did have close relations with Dudjom and Khyentse Rinpoche, as he says, then not to invite them to his center when they visited London in the 1970s was an unforgivable breach of protocol."[49]

An Eclectic Synthesis or a Personal Invention?

Triratna's defenders insist that traditional lineage is less important than direct insight and effective practice. Critics, however, see the movement's eclectic blending of Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna, Western psychotherapy, and even Nietzschean ideas as evidence that the only consistent thread is Sangharakshita's own interpretation. Ken Jones, a pioneering British Zen teacher and social-engagement activist, described the FWBO in 1997 as "a deviant form of Buddhism" shaped far more by "Sangharakshita's psychology" than by any received tradition.[50] An anonymous senior British Buddhist teacher quoted in the same period called it a "Westernised semi-intellectual pot-pourri" that many traditional Buddhists view with suspicion.[51]

When the authenticity of Sangharakshita's Theravāda training is questioned by Theravāda monks, his Tibetan credentials are rejected by Tibetan lamas, and his overall approach is criticised as idiosyncratic by figures ranging from Ajahn Brahm to Stephen Batchelor, what remains as the source of authority? For many observers, the answer

is clear: Triratna's lineage effectively begins and ends with Sangharakshita himself. The movement may sincerely aim to preserve the Dharma in the modern West, but its foundations rest on one man's highly individual — and repeatedly contested — reading of the Buddhist tradition.

Insulation from Scrutiny: A Departure from the Buddha's Call to Test Teachings

The lack of verifiable ties to established lineages not only questions Triratna's roots but also potentially shields Sangharakshita's teachings from the external scrutiny that traditional Buddhist structures encourage. This stands in direct opposition to the Buddha's guidance in the *Kesamutti Sutta* (also known as the *Kalama Sutta*), where he urges seekers not to accept doctrines based on reports, legends, traditions, scripture, logical conjecture, or even the authority of a teacher, but to evaluate them through personal experience and their outcomes:

> "When you know for yourselves: 'These things are wholesome; these things are blameless; these things are praised by the wise; these things, if accepted and undertaken, lead to welfare and happiness,' then you should live in accordance with them."[52]
>
> *Kesamutti Sutta,* AN 3.65

In a lineage-based system, teachings are continually tested against the collective wisdom of past and present masters, aligning with the sutta's call to consult "the wise" as a safeguard against personal bias. Critics argue that Triratna's self-contained model undermines this: Stephen Batchelor has warned of its "self-enclosed system" and "rigid hierarchy" where followers "do not seem to question the teachings of their leader," risking "prob-

lems associated with 'cults'."[53] Ken Jones similarly highlighted how the group's culture, rooted in Sangharakshita's psychology, fosters "cult-like behaviour and victimisation," potentially discouraging independent testing.[54] The anonymous senior teacher noted the vulnerability of Western adherents, who may be keen to unquestioningly believe anything with the appearance of spirituality, further insulating interpretations from broader critique:

> "In the West perhaps people could distinguish between Catholicism and the Moonies but they can't distinguish between types of Buddhism. Not many know very much about Buddhism. Even the well-educated who are attracted to Buddhism are completely credulous when it comes to spiritual things."[55]

Without external anchors and accountability, Triratna's approach inadvertently prioritises loyalty over the empirical verification the Buddha advocated, raising concerns about whether its Dharma truly invites open inquiry or encloses it within one individual's unchallenged framework.

A PROFOUND BETRAYAL

Sangharakshita's Sexual Exploitation of Disciples and the Desecration of the Sangha Ideal

In the Pāli Canon, the Buddha repeatedly stresses that the Sangha is the priceless jewel whose purity must be fiercely guarded. The Vinaya's first *pārājika* and the *saṅghādisesa* rules exist not merely as restraints but as a solemn vow to protect the vulnerable from the very teacher who is meant to guide them. Sexual exploitation by a guru is therefore not a private failing but a catastrophic fracture of the Third Refuge: it transforms the Sangha from a field of safety into a hunting ground, and turns the guru's seat into a place of predation. Sangharakshita's documented sexual involvement with his own male disciples — often young, devoted, and psychologically dependent men — constitutes one of the most grievous betrayals of that ideal in modern Buddhist history.

Mark Dunlop, aged 22 and heterosexual, lived with Sangharakshita (then 47) shortly after joining in 1972. He described how resistance to sexual contact was reframed as spiritual blockage:

> "Paradoxically, the very fact that I felt so strongly that I didn't want to have sexual contact with Sangharakshita showed just how deeply I really was denying my real needs — otherwise why should I reject a little perfectly natural human affection so vehemently?"[56]

The acts themselves — Sangharakshita climbing into his bed, rubbing against him until orgasm — Dunlop later called "a form of rape … based on psychological and spiritual manipulation rather than crude physical

force". He endured them passively, "just waiting for him to finish", then always dreading the next request to "let me just lie beside you for a while". Decades later he wrote:

> "The actual physical sexual abuse ... was not much worse than a dog rubbing itself up on my leg. It was the psychological and spiritual abuse that was more damaging ... I found Sangharakshita's teaching to be a kind of poison, and some of the effects still linger."[57]

At least one of Sangharakshita's sexual partners was below the then-legal age of consent for homosexual acts in Britain (21 until 1994). A former member interviewed by the BBC in 2016[58] stated he was "under the legal age of consent" when pressurised into sex with the founder. Other disciples were only 19 or 20, emotionally isolated, and told that refusal would halt their spiritual progress. The Guardian[59] (2019) recorded retreats in Norfolk — Sangharakshita's residence for much of the 80s — where heterosexual men were taught that aversion to gay sex proved they were "blocked", creating an atmosphere one survivor likened to "a San Francisco gay bath-house rather than a Buddhist retreat."

The FWBO's long refusal to acknowledge harm magnified the victims' suffering immeasurably. For decades, complaints were dismissed, accusers vilified, and Sangharakshita's behaviour defended as "skilful means". Dunlop, after speaking out, was unsympathetically dropped from the order register[60] and faced hostility that left him "bewildered and disorientated"[61].

Further Voices from the Shadows

The testimonies on triratna-perspectives.com reveal not an isolated incident but a deliberate pattern — one in

which Sangharakshita weaponised the guru-disciple relationship using manipulative teachings to extract sexual compliance from young men who had surrendered their autonomy in search of refuge. Prasannasiddhi (formerly Sid), who was sexually involved with Sangharakshita in the early 1980s when he was in his twenties, resigned from the Order in 2010 with a letter that cuts through the lingering euphemisms:

> "Looking back on the sexual relationship I had with Sangharakshita 27 years ago, I feel deeply unhappy ... What for me was a sacrifice [of heterosexuality], was for him a preference, and I have a sense of disgust and of being used ... I also believe that he was misusing the natural power and authority of his position as a spiritual teacher, and the love and devotion engendered in me in relation to him in that position, to meet his needs for sex and intimacy ..."[62]

Professional counsellors, including one from Survivors UK, told Prasannasiddhi that the dynamic "equates to a form of sexual abuse". He was encouraged to see his involvement as a noble transcendence of "conditioning", only to discover decades later that Sangharakshita had concealed his true sexual preference the entire time. The betrayal is compounded: Prasannasiddhi was also persuaded to abandon his pregnant girlfriend and their child, following Sangharakshita's advice that family life was a hindrance to spiritual progress — a decision that caused enduring familial pain.

Alan J. W., in his detailed 2020 testimony, describes the institutional machinery that enabled the predatory abuse. Senior Order members, some who remain active, acted as procurers, inviting selected young men to Padmaloka where Sangharakshita could assess them:

"Dave, Andrew, M and I had been paraded before Sangharakshita like potential catamites before a pederast, whilst he took his time selecting his preference."[63]

Alan documents how the doctrine of "Greek love" — explicitly promoted in the late 1970s by senior Order members, some who remain active — justified pederastic relationships as spiritually efficacious:

"A homo-erotic relationship between an older, more experienced man, and a youth ... Sangharakshita believed that it was sometimes possible to make more progress — in forming a strong rapport with an individual of the same gender — in one night, than in months of platonic contact."[64]

One respected Order member later confirmed that some of Sangharakshita's partners were below the then-legal age of consent for homosexual acts (21 until 1994), yet "they hadn't always felt free to say no"[65]. Alan further notes that Sangharakshita continued sexual activity into the 2000s — long after publicly claiming celibacy — with at least one man in his mid-twenties in 2004.

In the view of many, one of the most offensive remarks made by Sangharakshita himself with regard to his sexual activity came in an interview, reproduced in a BBC documentary[66], where Sangharakshita was told that his past sexual activity has caused concern, and was asked if he would like to say anything to lay the issue to rest. He went on to say:

"There was a lot of experimentation within the FWBO and, for me personally, within my own life, there was also quite a lot of experimentation. In fact, I may say that this was for me personally one of the richest and one of the most creative periods in my whole life, and it is because of that — because

the FWBO was like that in those days, and because I was like that in those days — that we now have the FWBO that we have today."

We may legitimately infer, therefore, that the FWBO/Triratna was founded on the back of systematic predatory sexual and psychological abuse (un)dressed as spirituality. Heterosexual men were taught that aversion to sex with Sangharakshita was the very blockage that needed to be smashed; refusal was framed as spiritual failure. The guru who should have been the protector became the predator, and the Sangha that should have defended the vulnerable instead supplied them.

Only after Sangharakshita's death in 2018, and mounting pressure from the 2016-2020 safeguarding crisis, did the Order begin a restorative processes and issue partial apologies. Yet even then, senior figures continued to insist the misconduct was "relatively minor" when weighed against the founder's achievements.[67]

Let us recall the passage I was sold when I was first introduced to the controversies, from page 12 of the official report "Addressing Ethical Issues in Triratna":

> "For some of the individuals who looked up to Sangharakshita as a spiritual teacher, and who were also sexually involved with him, the emotional impact was painful and long-lasting.
>
> "It is important to be aware that this was not the case for everyone with whom Sangharakshita had a sexual encounter and that attitudes towards sexual relations have changed greatly since the 1970s and '80s. Important generational differences have also emerged; and some older Order members who were involved in these events told us that they feared that past events were being misrepresented because they were unfairly judged according to today's very different expectations."

This pattern of dismissal and denial is itself a second abuse, perpetuated by the ignorance and clinging of some members of the community. When a sangha closes ranks around a predator-guru, it forces survivors to carry not only their original trauma but the additional burden of being disbelieved, gaslighted, and exiled from the very community that was supposed to protect them. Their suffering is compounded into a deeper existential wound: the realisation that the refuge they sought was the source of their harm.

Those who were not directly abused but who follow his teachings have to contend with these facts and engage in ethical gymnastics when integrating his teachings into their lives. If such difficulties result in attrition, then those that remain by definition are going to be, to varying degrees, more emotionally creative, or simply less empathetic. Some simply "shut their ears" whenever Sangharakshita is mentioned. Others are very happy to go on reverencing him openly, regardless of the suffering that may arise in the minds of those around them.

Despite Sangharakshita's teachings often falling far short of the true universal Dharma taught by the Buddha, and the abuse to which his victims were subjected, his cult of personality remains strong, thanks to the zealous reverence afforded to him by many Order members and the cultish traits upon which the Order is based.

CULTISH COMMITMENTS

The Ordination Process that Binds Blindly

As we have already seen, Sangharakshita's FWBO which was renamed to Triratna sought to adapt ancient Buddhist principles to contemporary Western life, emphasising community, ethical living, and personal transformation. Yet, beneath its aspirational facade, critics have long pointed to patterns that echo cult-like dynamics — not necessarily through deliberate malice, but often as unintended consequences of its organisational structure, teachings, and ordination processes. Over the coming chapters we will explore these emergent patterns, focusing on how structures and ideas within Triratna may inadvertently foster an environment conducive to high-control behaviours. Importantly, I do not posit any collective, organised intentional spiritual grooming or predatory design; rather, these cult-like outcomes appear as by-products of a system prioritising intense devotion, hierarchical guidance, and communal immersion, which can amplify psychological vulnerabilities without overt ill-intent.

The existence of cult-like qualities in Triratna exacerbates the ongoing harms being done to those who are unable to hold the contradiction of having a teacher who was a sexual and psychological abuser when he is revered on a regular basis by the more zealous members of the community.

Among the most insidious vulnerabilities of any Buddhist-derived organisation that fails to guard against the emergence of cult-like tendencies is the manner in which the Buddha's no-self (*anattā*) doctrine can be co-

opted to forge an exclusive, compensatory group identity. Devoted practitioners, having relinquished their former sense of self, frequently transfer that very attachment to the institution itself, its rituals, and the charismatic authority figure at its centre.

The Guardian's 1997 article quotes the prominent Buddhist commentator Stephen Batchelor as saying he had always feared in the FWBO as a "potentially totalitarian system". He said: "They operate as a self-enclosed system and their writings have the predictability of those who believe they have all the answers. They are structured in a rigid hierarchy and do not seem to question the teachings of their leader. As with many new religious movements, their enthusiasm and unconventional convictions have the potential to lead to problems associated with 'cults' and one centre in the eighties does appear to have tipped over into full-blown cultish behaviour, which, to the FWBO's credit, they closed down."[68]

Observations of Cult-Like Traits in Triratna

Below I record some of the behaviours I personally observed or encountered via reports during my time as a member of the Triratna Buddhist Community that struck me as distinctly cult-like.

Conditioning Practices on Retreats

- Periods of total silence imposed on everyone, including complete beginners. While silence can deepen practice, mandated total silence without the option for quiet Dharma discussion is a subtle control mechanism. The Buddha, in the *Pāsarāsi Sutta* (MN 26), recommended either "discussion of the Dharma or noble silence". Quiet rooms designated for gentle Dharma conversation would have preserved the spirit of the retreat without the cultic overtones.

- Strong discouragement from contacting friends and family in the outside world, creating the illusion of seclusion whilst fostering dependency on the group. Although it may be helpful to disconnect sometimes, to completely substitute friends and family with new connections engenders a group identity. The implication is those we disconnect from are unhelpful in our lives right now and our fellow retreatants are our new temporary family. This fosters dependency and potentially alienates friends and family.

- Closing pep talks at the end of some retreats that explicitly described the retreat as having been "reality" and the outside world to which we were returning as "abnormality"; Other closing pep talks where participants were urged to "visualise this place when things

get hard out there" and to return as soon as possible. Both practices serve to foster dependency and, in the case of "reality vs. abnormality", an "us vs. them" dichotomy.

- Night-time fire rituals in which written intentions, wishes or confessions were burned in bonfires while some participants processed with torches.

Controlling Behaviours

- Encouragement to volunteer for Triratna charities and spend more time engaging with the group as a healthy cure for a life that is assumed to be lacking.

- Freedom of some participants to contribute in some study group sessions being highly controlled, giving rise to a sense of fear.

- Retreatants being taken aside and asked to speak less about their personal understanding of the Dharma so as not to 'confuse' others.

- In front of peers, unordained members being told heavy-handedly that disagreeing with Sangharakshita's teachings meant having to reconsider whether Triratna was the right choice.

- Upon leaving, being strongly discouraged from discussing reasons with others who had recently left and having concerns about survivor testimonies dismissed as media invention.

Coercive Fundraising Practices

- Donors receiving unusually persistent personal follow-up messages from representatives of a major Triratna charity shortly after making one-off donations. Seemed friendly but felt hollow, like there was an ulterior motive to get more donations.

- Emails from a major Triratna charity urging members to commit a day's wages each month. The pressure fell disproportionately on those who were far from affluent.

- External Order members giving fundraising talks to the unordained community, raising funds for a charity set up to help finance Order members.

- Telephone fundraising campaigns for Right Livelihood salaries; the unspoken implication was that refusal signalled inadequate commitment. Several people I knew were unemployed or on very low incomes at the time.

- Hard-sell *dāna* appeals at the close of retreats. When delivered in conjunction with teachings on the perfection of generosity (*dānapāramī*) this becomes even more coercive.

- Pairs of Order-members meeting individual retreatants alone to "facilitate" their donations. My experience of this practice was that the atmosphere could be intensely pressurising; on one occasion I increased my intended amount on the spot out of fear of appearing ungrateful. Requests to donate privately (in keeping

with the Buddha's advice that giving should not be proclaimed) were sometimes refused or dissuaded.

Other Cult-Like Features

- Frequent vocal displays of "gratitude", thankful for how Sangharakshita "did all of this".

- Routine confession practice among Order members and aspirants, in which highly intimate and sometimes deeply disturbing personal material is sometimes shared. Such mutual knowledge of secrets is a classic mechanism for dissolving individual identity and increasing dependency on the group (Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*, 2022 edition).

- Very low stipends paid to those working in Triratna retreat centres and Right Livelihood businesses, creating financial dependency and presenting ongoing "spiritual tests" for those hoping to be ordained.

- Policies at some retreat centres that only those actively seeking ordination may live in residential community, fostering spiritual elitism, "in-group/out-group" and "us vs. them" mentalities.

- Elite marks of distinction worn around Order member's necks with decorative tassels and an ornate tricolour emblem. This "kesa" resembles a couple of medals or an academic badge of honour. Craving for and attachment to "gain, honour and renown" can arise through such marks of distinction.

A Framework for Analysis of Cult-Like Traits

To frame any further examination into the FWBO and Triratna's cult-like aspects, it is essential to draw upon established scholarly frameworks for understanding cult-like behaviour in groups. These traits, identified by experts in psychology and sociology, provide a lens through which we can assess Triratna's practices. Each behaviour is not unique to cults but becomes problematic when interwoven to create dependency and insularity. I introduce them here, supported by authoritative sources, before turning to how Sangharakshita's talks and teachings might reflect these elements in ways that subtly contribute to a cultish atmosphere.

Charismatic Leader

One foundational trait is charismatic leadership and rapport-building, where figures use personal anecdotes, humility, and authority to forge deep emotional bonds, often positioning themselves as indispensable guides. Steven Hassan's *Combating Cult Mind Control* (2024)[69] details this through his BITE model (Behaviour, Information, Thought, and Emotion control), illustrating how charisma disarms followers and builds initial trust. Similarly, Margaret Thaler Singer's *Cults in Our Midst* (2003)[70] examines rapport as a recruitment foundation, while a 2024 study from Ursinus College on "Charismatic Leadership and Vulnerability"[71] links it to "dark triad" personality traits that enhance leader-follower dependency.

Ideological Manipulation

Closely related is ideological manipulation, involving the reframing of doctrines to promise ultimate liberation

while subtly enforcing control, such as through loaded language or metaphors that discourage external perspectives. Robert Jay Lifton's seminal *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism* (2022)[72] outlines criteria like "loading the language" to reshape beliefs, a concept echoed in Amanda Montell's *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism* (2021)[73], which dissects how jargon normalises manipulation in modern groups. Alexandra Stein's *Terror, Love and Brainwashing* (2016)[74] further connects this to attachment exploitation, where ideologies bind members emotionally.

Suppression of Dissent

Another key indicator is the suppression of dissent or critical thinking, where doubt is pathologised as a personal failing, stifling open inquiry and reinforcing orthodoxy. Janja Lalich's *Bounded Choice* (2020)[75] describes this as creating "bounded choice," where questioning is framed as a barrier to progress. Arthur J. Deikman's work in *The Wrong Way Home* (1994)[76] highlights punishment of disagreement, and Best's *Cults: A Psychological Perspective* (2018) explores how sceptical doubt is engineered as an internal obstacle.

Us vs. Them

Isolation through an "us versus them" dichotomy is also prevalent, portraying the external world as hostile or unenlightened to deepen group reliance. Eileen Barker's *The Making of a Moonie* (1984)[77] documents this in sociological terms via case studies of isolation tactics. Lalich and Madeleine Tobias's *Take Back Your Life* (2006)[78] details environmental controls using such framing, while a 2022 PMC article on "Personality Cult or a Mere Matter of Popularity?"[79] contrasts it with mainstream dynamics.

All-or-Nothing Loyalty

Demanding total commitment manifests as all-or-nothing loyalty, where partial engagement is deemed insufficient, escalating devotion to the group's demands. Hassan's *Combating Cult Mind Control* (2024) addresses this in its emotional control aspects, and Singer's *Cults in Our Midst* (2003) links it to "love bombing" techniques. The chapter by Joseph Pierre on "Cults of Personality" in *A Clinical and Forensic Guide to Cults and Persuasive Leadership*[80] probes the power structures enforcing such unwavering allegiance.

Ego Dissolution and Identity Remoulding

Ego dissolution and identity remoulding involve encouraging the breakdown of personal boundaries and self-concepts, often under the guise of growth, to reshape individuals in the group's image. Lifton's *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism* (2022) covers identity breakdown through confession and "sacred science." Stein's *Terror, Love and Brainwashing* (2016) ties this to trauma bonding, and a 1998 ICSA article on "Cult Experience: Psychological Abuse, Distress, Personality Characteristics, and Changes in Personal Relationships"[81] examines resultant identity shifts.

Grooming Disguised as Spiritual Growth

Finally, recruitment or grooming disguised as spiritual growth can normalise boundary-pushing or exploitation by framing it as enlightening. Montell's *Cultish* (2021) deconstructs grooming in contemporary settings, Lalich's *Bounded Choice* (2020) reviews exploitation as "spiritual tests," and a Walden University PhD dissertation on

"Psychological Manipulation and Cluster-B Personality Traits of Cult Leaders" (2023)[82] connects leader traits to such dynamics. A 2023 *Discover Magazine* article on "What Makes a Cult, and How Do Cult Leaders Control Their Followers?"[83] further outlines narcissistic grooming tactics.

With these traits in mind, drawn from rigorous academic inquiry, we can now turn to Sangharakshita's own words — extracted from his talks and teachings — to observe how they might, as unintended by-products of Triratna's fervent commitment to Buddhist ideals, mirror these behaviours and contribute to an atmosphere of insularity and control.

ENTERING THE SANGHA, 2007

Cult-Like Trait Analysis

In his 2007 talk titled *Entering the Sangha*, delivered at the Buddhafield Festival, the full audio of which is freely available online[84], Sangharakshita begins with a warm greeting, expressing his delight at finally attending the event after hearing about it for twelve years. He shares light-hearted anecdotes about his appearance and the venue, tying the discussion thematically to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. He then explores the meaning of Dharma, drawing from Pāli scriptures to liken the Buddha's teachings to the great ocean: gradual in penetration, rich in treasures like the Four Noble Truths and meditation practices, and uniformly tasting of freedom (*vimutti*).

Sangharakshita emphasises freedom as a core aspect of Buddhism, contrasting it with bondage and restriction. He recounts his experiences in 1950s India, teaching newly converted ex-untouchables who felt liberated after embracing Buddhism under Dr. Ambedkar's leadership. He extends this to the festival setting, where attendees escape urban constraints, enjoy activities like hot tubs, and allow children safe freedom. He invokes metaphors of imprisonment, including Plato's cave, to describe human existence as fettered.

The talk delves into three key fetters (*samyojana*) hindering spiritual progress: fixed personality view (*satkāyadṛṣṭi*), attachment to rules and observances (*śīlavrata-parāmarśa*), and doubt (*vicikitsa*). He illustrates these with examples, such as rigid self-identities limiting change, half-hearted practices yielding no benefit, and wavering skepticism preventing commitment. As

positive counterparts, he proposes his "three C's": be creative (remaking oneself), committed (wholehearted engagement), and clear (overcoming fuzzy thinking). He concludes that embodying these leads to true freedom, deeper understanding of the Dharma, and the ability to benefit oneself and others.

Analysis

I shall approach this talk with caution, viewing it through the lens of the patterns common in high-control groups that were authoritatively established in the previous chapter. Critics have described Triratna as a personality cult where Sangharakshita's teachings are treated as beyond reproach, and ethical lapses — including his admitted coercive sexual relationships with male followers, framed as spiritual exercises to dismantle ego or "heterosexual conditioning" — have been downplayed or evaded[85][86]. At least one such relationship is linked to a follower's suicide[87], and as recently as 2025, centres like the Nottingham Buddhist Centre have been accused of celebrating Sangharakshita despite these issues[88][89]. The Buddhafield Festival, where this talk was given, is organised by Triratna members and serves as a fundraising and recruitment platform, blending Buddhist teachings with alternative lifestyle elements to draw in participants[90][91]. This context is vital: the talk is not a neutral exposition but a performance by a controversial public figure[92] within a criticised organisation, potentially grooming listeners for deeper involvement.[93]

Sangharakshita's opening establishes charisma and rapport, a common tactic in cult-like groups to build trust and authority. He positions himself humbly as an "old man" who "can't speak so loudly as some of you younger ones," while noting his long-awaited presence: "I've been hearing about Buddhafield for the last twelve years,

but of course this is the first time I've actually been here." This creates a sense of occasion, implying his endorsement validates the community. His playful mishearing of "Dharma Parlour" as "*dharmapāla*" (dharma protector) and reference to the nursery rhyme — "Will you walk into my parlour? said the spider to the fly. So here I am in your parlour. Yes, here I am in your parlour, in the centre of your web" — is disarmingly ironic. From a sceptical view, it subtly asserts centrality, evoking entrapment metaphors while laughing them off, which can desensitise audiences to power imbalances.[94]

The ocean metaphor for Dharma idealises the teachings as abundant and liberating, but warns against seeking "something else, something additional" amid the "so many books" available. This could discourage external exploration, fostering reliance on Triratna's syncretic approach. Freedom (*vimutti*) is central, but reframed manipulatively: "If the Buddha's teaching doesn't make you free, it isn't really the Buddha's teaching." Stories of ex-untouchables feeling "free" post-conversion appeal to social justice, yet in Triratna's context, this promises empowerment while potentially delivering control. At Buddhafield, freedom means escaping "the usual rut," with anecdotes like the hot tub critic who later enjoys one "with me in the hot tub, there was a beautiful dhakini." This normalises permissive behaviours, echoing testimonies that state Sangharakshita framed sexual acts as liberating.[95]

Prison metaphors intensify an "us vs. them" dichotomy: "human life itself can be compared to a prison," with Plato's cave showing people bound, seeing only shadows. This portrays the outside world as restrictive, the group as enlightening — a classic isolation technique. Some "make the prison a bit more comfortable rather

than trying to escape," subtly critiquing non-committed individuals.[96]

The fetters section raises red flags. Fixed personality view encourages identity dissolution: "We have to have … a creative attitude towards ourselves. That we have to have the belief that we can create or recreate ourselves as we wish." Citing transsexuals and noting Triratna's "catholicity" includes them, he pivots to mental change via meditation. In cults, this erodes boundaries, remoulding members. Radical change is a "battle," implying resistance is failure.[97]

Attachment to rules means avoiding "just going through the motions": "No religious practice … will do you any good unless you can do it with your whole heart and your whole soul." Biblical quote reinforces: "Whatever your hand findeth to do, do it with all your might." This demands all-or-nothing loyalty, common in high-control groups where partial engagement is pathologised.[98]

Doubt (*vicikitsa*) is "sceptical doubt" that wavers: "the doubt produces a sort of wavering, a sort of uncertainty which prevents you again from committing yourself wholeheartedly." Vilifying doubt stifles criticism, equating it with spiritual blockage — a hallmark of cults where dissent is weakness. The victims of Sangharakshita's abuse faced discrediting.[99]

The "three C's" — creative, committed, clear — personalise ideology, promising freedom through obedience. Overall, the talk exhibits cult-like traits: glorifying the group, demanding commitment, quashing doubt, and masking control as liberation. It warrants scrutiny as potential ideological grooming.

THE SEVEN PAPERS

The "Seven Papers"[100] are a seminal collection of seven papers written by Subhuti (a senior disciple in the Triratna Buddhist Order) in close collaboration with Sangharakshita. Published as a book in 2013 (with some revisions in later editions, including 2018), the papers systematically explore and clarify the foundational principles, structure, and vision of the Triratna Buddhist Order and Community. They particularly follow through on the implications of Sangharakshita's key statement that the Triratna Buddhist Order is "the community of his disciples and disciples of his disciples, practising according to his 'particular presentation of the Dharma'."[101]

The papers address topics such as ordination, reverence for the Dharma, the nature of the Buddha, spiritual hierarchy, lineage, and the Order's role in creating a new society through Buddhist practice.

The seven papers are:

1. **What is the Western Buddhist Order?** (including a Note on discipleship) — Originally written under the Order's former name, this defines the essence and membership of the Order.

2. **Revering and Relying upon the Dharma** — Explores attitudes of reverence and spiritual hierarchy in practice.

3. **Re-Imagining The Buddha** (and **Buddhophany**) — Reconsidering the figure of the Buddha and experiences of his presence in a modern context.

4. **Initiation into a New Life: the Ordination Ceremony in Sangharakshita's System of Spiritual Practice** (revised 2018) — Details the meaning and process of ordination in Triratna.

5. **'A Supra-Personal Force or Energy working through me': the Triratna Buddhist Community and the Stream of the Dharma** — Discusses spiritual transmission and lineage beyond the personal.

6. **The Dharma Revolution and the New Society** — Outlines the broader societal vision of Triratna's Dharma practice.

7. **A Buddhist Manifesto: the Principles of the Triratna Buddhist Community** — Summarises core principles guiding the Community.

These papers are considered definitive texts within Triratna for understanding its distinctive approach to Buddhism, emphasising a unified, non-sectarian presentation of the Dharma suited to modern conditions.

To the extent that the Seven Papers reinforce unquestioning loyalty to a single charismatic (and ethically compromised) founder, exclusive truth claims, and an unaccountable hierarchical system, they risk perpetuating the very dynamics that enabled decades of abuse and high-control behaviour in parts of the movement. Even Triratna's own 2023 publication "The Seven Papers Revisited: Criticisms and Clarifications"[102] acknowledges that the original papers attracted significant criticism and required clarification, indicating that concerns about authoritarian or cult-like implications were widespread enough to require a formal response. For many ex-mem-

bers and observers, the papers do not resolve the problems — they entrench them.

It is therefore to the Seven Papers that we now turn to assess their degree of alignment with cult-like traits.

WHAT IS THE WESTERN BUDDHIST ORDER?

Cult-Like Trait Analysis

The first of the 'Seven Papers' is the 2009 document "What is the Western Buddhist Order?"[103] — a question and answers session framed as Sangharakshita's "Last Will and Testament" for the Triratna Buddhist Order. As of November 2025 this is listed as essential reading for aspiring Triratna Order members[104].

"What is the Western Buddhist Order?" is a document rooted in attachment to doctrine and group identity, containing very little loving kindness or compassion. It is quite contrary to the Buddha's own instructions to Ānanda in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (DN 16). Nearing the end of his life, the Buddha is asked whether he was going to leave any instructions as to the continuity of the Sangha. His famous reply is a lesson in humility to all dharma teachers:

> "But what could the mendicant Saṅgha expect from me, Ānanda? I've taught the Dhamma without making any distinction between secret and public teachings. The Realised One doesn't have the closed fist of a tutor when it comes to the teachings. ...
>
> "So Ānanda, live as your own island, your own refuge, with no other refuge. Let the teaching be your island and your refuge, with no other refuge. ...
>
> "Whether now or after I have passed, any who shall live as their own island, their own refuge, with no other refuge; with the teaching as their island and their refuge, with no other refuge — [they] shall be among the best of the best."[105]

This passage has been a cornerstone of Buddhist thought since the early centuries CE. Preserved in Pāli, Sanskrit fragments, Chinese Āgamas, and Tibetan Vinaya versions, it underscores self-reliance (*attadīpā viharatha*), personal verification of teachings through practice (especially the four foundations of mindfulness), and the Dharma as the ultimate, non-human authority. This teaching emerged in a context of the Buddha rejecting a successor, creating a "power vacuum" that lineages addressed through diverse interpretive strategies. Successive schools have universally revered it as a call to experiential insight over blind faith, but interpretations vary by emphasis: Theravāda on individual monastic discipline, Mahāyāna on innate buddha-nature, and Vajrayāna on balancing guru devotion with discernment. It has profoundly shaped transmission by promoting adaptive, critically examined lineages rather than rigid hierarchies, ensuring teachings evolve through personal realisation.

Sangharakshita chose not to follow the approach of the Buddha and other traditions, instead insisting dogmatically that his vision should take total precedent over anything else, based on a rigid hierarchy with him at its centre. His answers to questions from Order members reveal patterns consistent with cult leader traits, such as centralising authority around himself, demanding unwavering loyalty, suppressing external influences, and reframing dissent as spiritual failure. These align with models from authoritative sources like Steven Hassan's BITE framework (Behaviour, Information, Thought, Emotion control) in *Combating Cult Mind Control* (2024), Robert Jay Lifton's eight criteria for thought reform in *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*

(2022), and Janja Lalich's "bounded choice" in *Bounded Choice* (2004).

I categorise the highlights below, quoting verbatim from the document (with page references) and explaining the cult-like implications. Note: No intentional malice is assumed; these qualities emerge as by-products of a system emphasising hierarchical discipleship. However, they risk fostering dependency, isolation, and control.

Charismatic Leader (High Alignment)

Sangharakshita positions himself as the Order's irreplaceable founder and "defining" teacher, using humility (e.g., his age) while asserting ultimate authority. This builds emotional dependency, as per Hassan's BITE model (emotional control via leader reverence) and Singer & Lalich's *Cults in Our Midst* (2003) on rapport as recruitment/retention.

> "Now that I am in my 84th year, I am glad to have had the opportunity of placing on record my views ... My replies ... may, indeed, be seen as my Last Will and Testament for the Order, and I therefore request all Order members not only to 'read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest' its contents but also to give it appropriate expression in their lives as Order members." (p. 1)

- This frames the document as sacred inheritance, demanding internalisation and obedience, elevating his words to scripture-like status.

"Basically the Order can be defined as the community of my disciples and the disciples of my disciples... The Order is the community of my disciples." (p. 2)

- This centres the group entirely on personal allegiance to him, echoing Lifton's "dispensing of existence" where the leader defines membership.

"My version is that, directly or indirectly, I decide. The Order cannot be redefined democratically ... The duty of my disciples is to adhere faithfully to the teaching they have received from me ... and to remain in personal contact with me and with their own Preceptors." (p. 3)

- He claims sole definitional power, rejecting collective input; demands "faithfulness" and ongoing contact, fostering leader-centric bonds.

The document demonstrates high alignment to the 'charismatic leader' trait. Sangharakshita positions himself as the irreplaceable founder and "defining" teacher, framing the document as his "Last Will and Testament" and demanding internalisation and obedience, which strongly fosters emotional dependency and leader reverence.

Ideological Manipulation (High Alignment)

Sangharakshita reframes Buddhist history and teachings to justify his exclusive "particular presentation," using metaphors and exclusions to load language (Lifton, 2022) and normalise control as "traditional" (Montell, *Cultish*, 2021).

"This is exactly what I have done [like the Buddha] ... The lesson of the history of Buddhism would appear to be that you need a specific 'defining' teacher for any particular Sangha." (p. 2)

- He equates himself with the Teachers of the Past as a "defining" figure, manipulating the tradition of lineage systems to legitimise his authority and imply the Order's superiority.

"My particular presentation consists of those teachings and practices I have stressed ... I explicitly exclude whatever ideas are incompatible with them ... These teachings and emphases ... create something not really definable: a certain atmosphere or attitude that is found within the FWBO and nowhere else." (p. 4)

- He defines the Dharma narrowly around his views, excluding alternatives; the "undefinable atmosphere" mystifies the ideology, making it hard to critique.

"The great danger for the Order in future will be that there are people who are in fact no longer members ... but who remain members ... because it is convenient for them ... or simple inertia keeps them in it." (p. 5)

- He redefines true membership as adherence to his "presentation," pathologising deviation as inauthenticity.

"We are not going for refuge to them [Teachers of the Past] ... Just because a teacher is there on our tree does not necessarily mean that their teaching can be taught in our centres." (p. 7)

- He selectively appropriates Buddhist history while dismissing incompatible elements, controlling the ideological narrative.

The document demonstrates a high alignment to the 'ideological manipulation' trait. He reframes Buddhist history to justify his exclusive presentation, excludes incompatible ideas, and uses mystifying language like an "undefinable atmosphere" to control the narrative and normalise his authority.

Suppression of Dissent (High Alignment)

Dissent is vilified by Sangharakshita as lack of faith or misunderstanding, encouraging self-censorship (Lalich's *Bounded Choice*, 2004; Deikman in *The Wrong Way Home*, 1994).

"You can't practise [different teachings] simultaneously ... Going to other teachers is often a sign of lack of confidence in what one already has." (p. 3)

- He frames exploration as weakness, suppressing curiosity.

"If Order members find themselves disagreeing with me on significant issues, I expect them to discuss that with me ... Otherwise being a disciple doesn't mean very much." (p. 8)

- He ties discipleship to agreement; disagreement risks invalidating membership.

"True criticism ... should take place in the context of an assumption that something is being said by the teacher that is of spiritual significance ... If you cannot make that assumption you have probably already ceased to be a disciple." (p. 8)

- He redefines criticism as requiring prior faith, stifling genuine doubt.

"If someone was actively propagating their rejection of single-sex activities … that would surely bring his or her membership of the Order into question." (p. 10)

- He punishes public dissent by threatening expulsion.

"One must beware of what I've called 'pseudo-spiritual technism' … People are often lacking in self confidence. They want to be told, 'You're OK'." (p. 22)

- He dismisses needs for guidance as insecurity, discouraging questions about practices.

The document demonstrates high alignment to the 'suppression of dissent' trait. Dissent is framed as a lack of faith, weakness, or invalidating discipleship; public disagreement risks expulsion, and criticism must assume the teacher's spiritual significance, effectively stifling open inquiry.

Us vs. Them (High Alignment)

External influences are portrayed by Sangharakshita as threats, promoting group exclusivity (Barker, *The Making of a Moonie*, 1984; Lalich & Tobias, *Take Back Your Life*, 2006).

"Anyone who has practised within the FWBO and who finds the FWBO unsatisfactory is … free to start teaching their own disciples … But they would be leaving the Order." (p. 3)

- He leaves no room for internal innovation; deviation requires exit, isolating innovators.

"When someone becomes a mitra ... they declare that they wish to practise the Dharma within the context of the FWBO ... And choosing this Order means choosing me as your teacher and not shopping around for others outside the Order." (p. 5)

- He frames pre-commitment as "shopping around," isolating from broader Buddhism.

"You can hardly involve yourself with him [external teacher] to any extent without becoming involved in his tradition ... that will therefore take you out of the Order." (p. 13)

- He is saying that external engagement risks contamination, enforcing "us vs. them."

"But one must be careful that one does not get so absorbed ... and moving away from the Order, as has happened in two or three cases." (p. 15)

- He warns of "absorption" in externals as betrayal, heightening isolation.

"What we've already got is, broadly speaking, sufficient ... I think some people want something new without having a full acquaintance with what already is available." (p. 17)

- He discourages seeking outside, portraying internal resources as complete.

The document demonstrates high alignment to the 'us vs. them' trait. External influences are portrayed as threats leading to "contamination" or betrayal; seeking outside teachings is discouraged as "shopping around," enforcing group exclusivity and isolation from broader Buddhism.

All-or-Nothing Loyalty (High Alignment)

He emphasises all-or-nothing loyalty, with partial engagement as failure (Hassan, 2018; Singer & Lalich, 2003).

"An order required one to make a definite commitment ... going for refuge ... and undertaking to observe the ten precepts." (pp. 1-2)

- He ties membership to absolute vows, enforcing behavioural control.

"For commitment to be strong it has, in a sense, to be narrow. It is only through intensity of commitment and practice that you achieve any results." (p. 3)

- He demands exclusive, intense devotion, pathologising moderation.

"An Order member remains truly an Order member because he or she accepts that definition and works within it — and I mean accepts it effectively, through real understanding ... active practice ... and diligent participation." (p. 5)

- He says "true" membership requires total immersion, with "name-only" members as threats.

"They should be very sure about their basic commitment to the Order ... They would certainly need to have thoroughly discussed all this with their Preceptors and spiritual friends." (p. 14)

- He insists external pursuits require hierarchical approval, enforcing emotional and behavioural commitment.

"We therefore should take that [need for reassurance] into account and give them encouragement ... But you can quite easily get that knowledge within the FWBO." (p. 18)

- He ties progress to internal commitment, dismissing external needs.

The document demonstrates high alignment to the 'all-or-nothing loyalty' trait. Membership requires absolute vows, exclusive intense devotion, and total immersion; partial engagement is pathologised as failure, with external practices needing hierarchical approval.

Ego Dissolution and Identity Remoulding (Moderate Alignment)

Sangharakshita encourages the remaking of the self via his teachings, eroding individual autonomy (Lifton, 2022; Stein, *Terror, Love and Brainwashing*, 2016).

"Everybody needs to be following the same founding teacher, be guided by the same doctrinal understanding ... If they do not do that they will not have sufficient in common to be an effective Sangha." (p. 4)

- His requirement of uniformity in thought and practice remoulds members into group identity.

"These teachings ... create something not really definable: a certain atmosphere or attitude that is found within the FWBO and nowhere else. All of them are contained in a network of spiritual friendship and they are to be handed on faithfully." (p. 5)

- This mystical "atmosphere" of his fosters a group identity, handed down via chains of discipleship.

"If that tendency [drift from institutions] continues the Order will simply become a kind of society or social club, and all the benefits ... will be lost." (p. 24)

- He is saying that non-participation erodes 'true' identity, pressuring conformity.

The document moderately aligns with the 'ego dissolution and identity remoulding' trait. There is emphasis on uniformity in thought and practice to create a group identity and "atmosphere," pressuring conformity, but there is less direct evidence of explicit ego breakdown here compared to other traits.

Grooming Disguised as Spiritual Growth (Moderate Alignment)

Sangharakshita frames control as "spiritual friendship" and growth, potentially normalising exploitation (Montell, 2021; Lalich, 2004).

"The group study of the Buddhist scriptures; the cultivation of spiritual friendship ... contribute to my disciples' progress to ever higher levels of being and consciousness." (p. 4)

- True spiritual friendship is of tremendous importance and benefit in any religious practice. However, Sangharakshita's idea of "spiritual friendship" in the 1970s and 1980s has been questioned elsewhere in this book. One has to be truly immune to the contradiction if one is to deeply integrate with such an ideal.

"They should be very sure about their basic commitment ... thoroughly discussed all this with their Preceptors and spiritual friends." (p. 14)

- In such a personality-centric framework, "spiritual friends" may come with differing levels of commit-

ment to the personality, potentially giving rise to a surveillance-like system where more committed aspirants might decide to report the failings of their friends to their Preceptors. This must especially be a risk given that there are limited places on the annual eleven-week-long ordination retreats in Spain, where postponement of ordination can come as real disappointment.

"Public Preceptors are the spiritually seniormost ... they are the keepers of the gate into the Order." (p. 19)

- This hierarchical gatekeeping frames recruitment as elite spiritual selection. Whether they are in truth the "spiritually seniormost" is not open for discussion.

"Everyone must play their part in keeping the Order ... alive, especially in terms of that indefinable element." (p. 25)

- This mystifies growth to justify ongoing involvement, potentially exploiting commitment.

The document shows moderate alignment to the 'grooming disguised as spiritual growth' trait. It frames control as "spiritual friendship" and hierarchical gatekeeping as elite selection, potentially normalising exploitation, but these are risks rather than direct instructions, and we must acknowledge the importance of healthy spiritual friendship.

Conclusion: Moderate to High

Overall, the responses given by Sangharakshita in the document "What is the Western Buddhist Order?" exhibit the words and tone of a leader consolidating power by defining the group as an extension of himself, while portraying deviations as serious spiritual shortcomings. This

risks cult-like dynamics, as seen in sources like Hassan's emphasis on leader dependency.

REVERING AND RELYING UPON THE DHARMA

Cult-Like Trait Analysis

The second of the 'Seven Papers' is the essay "Revering and Relying Upon the Dharma"[106] by Subhuti, published in 2013. It serves as a distillation of Sangharakshita's teachings on "Right View" (*samyag-dṛṣṭi*). It draws heavily on conversations with Sangharakshita and positions his interpretations as the "fundamental philosophical position" of the Triratna movement. While the essay is framed as an exposition of Buddhist principles like *pratītya-samutpāda* (conditioned arising), the *niyāmas* (orders of conditionality), and the avoidance of the two extremes of eternalism and nihilism, it repeatedly elevates Sangharakshita's personal experiences, evolving insights, and unique terminology (e.g., "Higher Evolution," "Cosmic Going for Refuge") as authoritative. This creates a narrative where loyalty to his unique perspective is equated with spiritual progress.

Using the preliminary research into cult-like traits set out in the chapter "Cultish Commitments", I shall analyse the essay's content. Each trait is assessed on a scale of *low*, *moderate*, or *high* potential to contribute to cult-like ideology, based on how the text might encourage dependency, insularity, or control within Triratna. Note that some of these traits may seem to align with the spiritual context — after all, Buddhism in any tradition often involves devotion and self-transcendence. They become problematic when interwoven to unconsciously prioritise

group conformity over individual autonomy. The essay's emphasis on Sangharakshita as the interpretive lens for the Dharma could subtly amplify these risks, especially as required reading for aspirants.

1. Charismatic Leader (High Alignment)

This trait involves building emotional bonds through personal anecdotes, humility, and authority, positioning the leader as an indispensable guide (Hassan, 2024; Singer, 2003). The essay heavily mythologises Sangharakshita's life and experiences, portraying him as uniquely attuned to supra-personal forces, which could foster dependency on him as the movement's spiritual conduit.

> "From his first contact with it, the Dharma made a direct and vivid impact upon him and within him. Reading the Diamond Sutra at the age of 16, he experienced 'something ineffable' that he 'at once joyfully embraced with an unqualified acceptance and assent'. This released in him a fountain of joyous energy and gave him a sense of unbounded freedom." (p. 7)

- This anecdote frames Sangharakshita's early life as a profound, almost predestined awakening, akin to a "calling" that sets him apart.

> "He had a particularly powerful experience of this supra-personal motivation after he arrived in Nagpur on 6th December 1956 ... He experienced himself responding entirely spontaneously to the crisis ... as if something from far beyond him was working through him ... Looking back and reflecting on his life as a whole it does seem to him that he has been driven by a wind from far beyond himself." (p. 7)

- Here, Subhuti describes Sangharakshita's actions as channeled from a transcendent source, reinforcing his

role as a vessel for the Dharma. This mirrors Hassan's BITE model, where charisma builds trust by implying divine or exceptional insight.

"Insofar as the movement is founded upon Sangharakshita's particular presentation of the Dharma, that requires us to know his fundamental philosophical position." (p. 2)

- The essay positions Sangharakshita as the core authority, with disciples urged to "discern" his views carefully, potentially creating a leader-follower dependency where his personal evolution defines the group's ideology.

This high alignment to the 'charismatic leader' cult-like ideology arises because the essay is not a neutral exposition but a hagiographic account, emphasising the founder's "luminous clarity" and "considerable powers of empathy" (p. 1), which could disarm critical thinking among aspirants.

2. Ideological Manipulation (High Alignment)

The ideological manipulation trait reframes doctrines with loaded language or metaphors to discourage external perspectives (Lifton, 2022; Montell, 2021). The essay promotes Sangharakshita's unique terminology and interpretations as essential, while cautioning against "misunderstanding and confusion" from inconsistent or traditional views, potentially normalising control through jargon.

"The remarkable richness and diversity of what he has said and written is certainly ... one of the most attractive features of the Triratna Community ... However, it also leaves potential problems. Consistency may indeed be a foolish hobgoblin, but inconsistency can lead to misunderstanding and confusion." (p. 1)

- Innovating upon Ralph Waldo Emerson's saying "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds," this introduces Sangharakshita's teachings as a "grand sweep" but warns of risks in diversity, implying his unified "fundamental position" must be prioritised to avoid errors — echoing Lifton's "loading the language."

"We must then always read his earlier teachings in the light of his later. This does not by any means require us to discard his earlier material — for instance, burning any book in which he uses terminology borrowed from the German Idealists, like 'The Absolute' ... And, of course, his disciples should take great care in how they themselves use that earlier material in their own practice." (pp. 1-2)

- This reframes his evolving ideas as progressive revelation, requiring disciples to interpret through his "most recent perspective," which could manipulate how members engage with Buddhist traditions outside his lens.

"For him, as for the Buddha, the fundamental expression of Right View is *pratītya-samutpāda* ... Sangharakshita sees this progression as a continuous sweep, which he connects with the idea of evolution ... He thus dares to speak poetically of a 'Cosmic Going for Refuge'." (pp. 7, 12 & 14)

- Terms like "Higher Evolution" and "Cosmic Going for Refuge" are Sangharakshita's coinages, presented as authentic extensions of the Buddha's teaching. The

essay warns against misinterpreting them as metaphysical (p. 14), but this could bind members to his reframing, discouraging independent exploration.

There is a high alignment to the 'ideological manipulation' trait, as the essay's structure — centring his "particular presentation" (p. 19) — uses Buddhist concepts to enforce interpretive loyalty, aligning with Stein's (2016) attachment exploitation.

3. Suppression of Dissent (Moderate Alignment)

Suppression of dissent is a trait that pathologises doubt as a personal failing, stifling inquiry (Lalich, 2020; Deikman, 1994). The essay stresses clearing "wrong views" and aligning with Sangharakshita's position, but frames it as spiritual hygiene rather than overt punishment.

> "We need to clear our minds of the wrong views, whether eternalist or nihilist in any of their many forms and sub-species, that make up so much of our thought and attitudes. This requires us to do quite a bit of self-examination, especially through study and discussion of the Dharma with those clearer than ourselves." (p. 5)

- Wrong views are linked to suffering and societal evils (p. 4: e.g., fascism), potentially framing dissent as a "personal failing" or barrier to progress, per Lalich's "bounded choice."

"When they teach the Dharma they should ensure that the basic position is clear and, if they choose to refer to other, more ambiguous material, they should make it obvious that they are doing so for particular purposes." (p. 2)

- This instructs disciples to qualify any deviation from his "basic position," which could suppress alternative interpretations by requiring disclaimers.

"Views sidetrack higher experience and prevent it from leading to liberation." (p. 4)

- Doubt or alternative views are portrayed as obstacles, encouraging self-censorship.

There is moderate alignment to the 'suppression of dissent' trait. The essay is rooted in standard Buddhist warnings against *micchā-dṛṣṭi* (wrong view), but in a founder-centric group, it could engineer skepticism as an "internal obstacle" (Best, 2018).

4. Us vs. Them (Moderate Alignment)

The trait of "us vs. them" creates isolation by portraying the external world as hostile or unenlightened (Barker, 1984; Lalich & Tobias, 2006). The essay contrasts Right View with "wrong views" in society, implying Triratna's approach (via Sangharakshita) as superior.

"The long experience of mankind amply demonstrates that ideas really do count: we can see, for example, the terrible inhumanity that flowed from views in the twentieth century, whether fascist, communist, or colonialist. Much of the danger in the world today stems from the confrontation in the Middle East between incompatible views." (p. 4)

- This dichotomises "helpful views" (aligned with Sangharakshita's) against external "wrong views," fostering reliance on the group.

"Of course, views have been the basis for much good in the world, too, and today we must hope and work for the triumph of humanitarian views of all kinds." (p. 4)

- While inclusive, it positions Buddhist (specifically Triratna's) views as the antidote to worldly ills.

"The survival of the world today depends upon the widespread influence of more helpful views about the nature of this life ..." (p. 4)

- This subtly elevates Triratna's ideology as salvific, potentially deepening "us" (practitioners on the path) vs. "them" (worldly society).

There seems to be a moderate alignment to 'us vs. them' thinking. It is not overtly hostile, but the founder-focused lens could insulate members from broader Buddhism.

5. All-or-Nothing Loyalty (High Alignment)

Demanding total commitment escalates devotion (Hassan, 2024; Singer, 2003). As essential reading, the essay equates full alignment with Sangharakshita's views to true practice, implying partial engagement is insufficient.

"What is the Triratna Community's fundamental philosophical position? Insofar as the movement is founded upon Sangharakshita's particular presentation of the Dharma, that requires us to know his fundamental philosophical position." (p. 2)

- This ties membership to his views, fostering unwavering allegiance.

"We will align ourselves with the progressive trend ... The Dhamma life ... depends on faith in the progressive trend in conditionality, especially as manifested in the *kamma-* and *dhamma-niyāmas.*" (pp. 15 & 17)

- Loyalty is framed as all-encompassing "alignment," with his System of Meditation as the path.

"This is the fundamental 'philosophical' position of the Triratna Community, insofar as it follows Sangharakshita's particular presentation of the Dharma." (p. 19)

- The closing reinforces total commitment to his framework.

Here we see a high alignment to the 'all-or-nothing loyalty' trait, as it demands "revering and relying upon" his interpretations for liberation.

6. Ego Dissolution and Identity Remoulding (Moderate Alignment)

For the trait of 'ego dissolution and identity remoulding' we are looking for any encouragement aimed at self-boundary breakdown under the guise of growth (Lifton, 2022; Stein, 2016). The essay promotes renouncing self-identity via practices like Spiritual Death, remoulding around Dharma (and Sangharakshita's view).

"The Stage of Spiritual Death ... Through practices like the Contemplation of the Six Elements, we deliberately see through and give up our self-identity." (p. 17)

- This ties to "sacred science" (Lifton), framing ego dissolution as essential.

"The *dhamma-niyāma* functions beyond our willing, so we must renounce the illusion of an independent self if it is to manifest within us." (p. 17)

- Identity is remoulded through transcendence, but group context could link it to Order loyalty.

"Progress is, in the end, progress in self-transcendence." (p. 17)

- This is core Buddhism, but paired with founder devotion, it risks trauma bonding.

There is moderate alignment to the 'ego dissolution and identity moulding' trait, as this is standard in Buddhism, but it could shift the identity toward Triratna norms.

7. Grooming Disguised as Spiritual Growth (Moderate Alignment)

For signs of the trait of grooming disguised as spiritual growth, we are looking for the normalising of boundary-pushing as enlightening, via processes like "Effective Going for Refuge" (Montell, 2021; Lalich, 2020). The essay frames Sangharakshita's path as systemic growth, potentially grooming aspirants.

"Until we have seen things directly as they are, we rely upon Right Views for our practice of the Dharma. This is why study is such an important aspect of Dharma practice." (p. 5)

- As essential reading, it grooms via his "Right View."

"'Cosmic Going for Refuge' ... is the momentum that carries the evolving organism on to the next level." (pp. 13-14)

- This disguises devotion as "spiritual tests."

- We also have the essay's focus on his "System of Meditation" (pp. 15-17) as the path to liberation.

We therefore see moderate alignment to 'grooming disguised as spiritual growth', as it is espousing intellectual grooming for conformity.

Conclusion: Moderate to High

Overall, the essay "Revering and Relying Upon the Dharma" fosters a moderate to high degree of cult-like elements by centring Sangharakshita's charisma and ideology, potentially creating dependency. However, it aligns with Buddhist norms and warns against reification, mitigating some risks. In Triratna, where historical reports of abuse exist, this could amplify insularity if not critically engaged.

RE-IMAGINING THE BUDDHA

Cult-Like Trait Analysis

The essay "Re-imagining the Buddha" by Subhuti (2010)[107], based on discussions with Sangharakshita, serves as a foundational text for aspiring Triratna Order members. It explores the role of imagination in Buddhist practice, urging a re-discovery of the Buddha's image free from traditional cultural constraints. While presented as a philosophical and spiritual exploration, the essay's content can be examined through the lens of cult-like traits outlined in the preliminary research in the chapter "Cultish Commitments". These traits include charismatic leadership, ideological manipulation, suppression of dissent, "us vs. them" dichotomies, all-or-nothing loyalty, ego dissolution/identity remoulding, and grooming disguised as spiritual growth.

This analysis assesses the *degree* to which the essay may contribute to a cult-like ideology within Triratna. It is not a definitive judgment on the organisation but a textual examination. The essay promotes a radical, imagination-centred reinterpretation of Buddhism, which could foster insularity and dependency if interpreted rigidly. However, it also emphasises individual discovery and empathy, mitigating some risks. Quotes are provided to illustrate points. Overall, the essay exhibits moderate to high alignment with several traits, potentially creating an atmosphere of fervent commitment to Sangharakshita's vision, though it lacks overt coercion.

1. Charismatic Leader (High Alignment)

The essay heavily centres Sangharakshita as an authoritative, indispensable guide, using personal anecdotes and deference to build emotional rapport. This mirrors Hassan's BITE model (charisma fostering dependency) and Singer's rapport-building in recruitment. Subhuti positions Sangharakshita as a visionary thinker whose ideas on imagination are transformative, often presenting the essay as "variations on themes by Sangharakshita" (p. 4). This creates a leader-follower dynamic where Sangharakshita's insights are elevated above traditional Buddhism.

"Sangharakshita founded the Triratna Buddhist Order unconstrained by any particular Buddhist cultural tradition and its members are therefore uniquely placed to rediscover the image of the Buddha." (p. 3)

- This implies Sangharakshita's founding act grants Triratna a special status, fostering dependency on his "unconstrained" approach.

"Sangharakshita once again calls on us to be much more radical, especially in our search for the Buddha's image." (p. 5)

- The repeated invocation of Sangharakshita as the source of radical ideas positions him as a charismatic catalyst for spiritual breakthroughs.

"I have shown what I have written to him and, once more, he confirms that I have accurately represented his thinking"

- Subhuti's humility reinforces Sangharakshita's authority, akin to "dark triad" traits in charismatic leadership (Ursinus College study), where followers self-subordinate.

The article's high alignment to the 'charismatic leadership' trait could contribute to a cultish atmosphere by making Sangharakshita's personal philosophy central to Order identity, discouraging external validation.

2. Ideological Manipulation (High Alignment)

The essay reframes Buddhist doctrines around "imagination" as the core faculty for enlightenment, using loaded language (e.g., "illumined imagination," "transcendental object") to discourage rationalism and external perspectives. This aligns with Lifton's "loading the language" and Montell's analysis of jargon normalising control, potentially binding members emotionally (Stein).

"Imagination is the faculty of self-transcendence." (p. 8)

- This elevates imagination as the "vehicle of the Dharma life" (p. 12), reinterpreting *pratītya-samutpāda* and the *niyāmas* through Sangharakshita's lens, implying traditional Buddhism lacks this "magical element" (p. 1).

"'Where reason has flown as high as it may', it is the 'illumined imagination' that 'must take over and continue'." (p. 5)

- This metaphor discourages intellectual scrutiny, framing reason as limited and imagination (as defined by Sangharakshita) as superior, which could manipulate beliefs by pathologising doubt as a failure of "illumination."

"The mystery cannot of course be explained conceptually ... 'Buddhism has no mania for explanation'." (p. 5)

- By emphasising mystery and symbol over explanation, the essay uses ideological reframing to promise

liberation while subtly enforcing Triratna-specific interpretations.

The article's high alignment with the 'ideological manipulation' trait could contribute to insularity by making Sangharakshita's "new Buddhist theory of imagination" (p. 4) the ideological core, potentially exploiting attachment to create emotional bonds to the group's unique worldview.

3. Suppression of Dissent (Low to Moderate Alignment)

The essay does not explicitly pathologise doubt or punish disagreement, but it subtly frames rationalism and critical thinking as barriers to spiritual progress, aligning somewhat with Lalich's "bounded choice" and Deikman's punishment of disagreement. It encourages suspending "willing" for imagination to flourish, which could stifle inquiry if applied rigidly.

> "For the imagination to flower we must suspend our willing and allow something new to arise from beyond our conscious identity." (p. 7)

- This "negative capability" (Keats reference) implies critical questioning hinders progress, echoing Best's engineering of doubt as an internal obstacle.

- The essay also critiques "narrow rationalism" among Dalit Buddhists (p. 3), framing it as a "shallow" failing that leads back to "ignorance and exploitation."

The degree to which the essay aligns with the 'suppression of dissent' trait is therefore low, as it promotes

exploration, but it could indirectly suppress dissent by valorising unquestioning immersion in imagination, creating orthodoxy around Sangharakshita's views.

4. Us vs. Them (Moderate Alignment)

The essay portrays external cultural and religious influences as hostile or debased, deepening reliance on Triratna's "unconstrained" approach. This echoes Barker's isolation tactics and Lalich and Tobias's environmental controls.

"In the Western, post-Christian world, the Buddhist today is tangled in a triple complexity of imagination ... We have rejected Christianity." (p. 2)

- This dichotomises "us" (Triratna Buddhists) vs. "them" (Christianity, rationalism), depicting the West as spiritually "broken" and needing Sangharakshita's revival.

"Our iconography and ritual, principally in the West, suggest a deviant Tibetan sect — and this potentially creates great difficulties for our work in India, where Tibetan imagery is indistinguishable from the Hindu variety." (pp. 3-4)

- It critiques external traditions as limiting or oppressive, urging rejection to foster "underlying unity" within Triratna (p. 4).

"Dividing my time between both India and the West, I have become more and more aware of the challenge ... without an underlying unity of imagery it will be increasingly difficult" (p. 4).

- This "us" (unified Triratna) vs. "them" (divided cultures) could isolate members by framing external worlds as unenlightened.

Demonstrating a moderate alignment to the "us vs. them" trait, the essay promotes group cohesion but risks insularity, especially in contrasting Triratna's "radical" path with "broken" traditions.

5. All-or-Nothing Loyalty (Moderate Alignment)

The essay demands total commitment via "*effective* Going for Refuge," framing partial engagement as insufficient, akin to Hassan's emotional control.

"[U]nless we can truly imagine the Buddha and his Enlightenment in a way that stirs us deeply we cannot mobilise our energies to Go for Refuge to him ... Without that transcendental object in one's imagination there can be no Going for Refuge in an effective sense." (pp. 4 & 36)

- This all-or-nothing view ties loyalty to full imaginative immersion, escalating devotion.

"He sees Going for Refuge as the act that characterises all aspects of the Dharma life ... on deeper and deeper levels until Enlightenment is reached." (p. 35)

- Levels of Refuge imply partial commitment (e.g., "*provisional*") is lesser, pressuring unwavering allegiance to Triratna's framework and fostering spiritual elitism.

"One cannot Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels at all effectively unless there is a deep imaginative connection." (p. 38)

- This links loyalty to emotional and imaginative bonds, potentially enforcing total devotion.

The essay's moderate alignment to the 'all-or-nothing loyalty' trait could foster cultish loyalty by making "effective Going for Refuge" contingent on full alignment with the group's ideology.

6. Ego Dissolution and Identity Remoulding (High Alignment)

The essay encourages breaking down self-attachment for "illumined imagination," reshaping identity under the guise of growth, aligning with Lifton's identity breakdown and Stein's trauma bonding.

"These arise once self-attachment is recognised for what it is and begins to be decisively weakened ... Imagination is the faculty of self-transcendence" (pp. 7-8)

- This frames ego dissolution as essential, remoulding the self into "imagination" itself.

"The stage of Spiritual Rebirth succeeds the stage of Spiritual Death, which is concerned with seeing through self-clinging." (p. 39)

- "Spiritual Death" (ego breakdown) leads to rebirth in the group's image, potentially via "sacred science" (Lifton).

"Illumined imagination is a pure responsiveness, without any trace of self-clinging." (p. 27)

- This idealises identity remoulding as enlightenment, but could exploit vulnerability.

The essay demonstrates a high alignment to the 'ego dissolution and identity remoulding' trait, as it systematises ego dissolution as a path to enlightenment, risking psychological abuse if misapplied.

7. Grooming Disguised as Spiritual Growth (Moderate Alignment)

The essay normalises boundary-pushing via "*effective* Going for Refuge" and imagination development, framing it as enlightening tests (Lalich, Montell).

"Imagination needs therefore to be engaged, fed, and expressed at every stage of involvement with the Dharma." (p. 35)

- This "journey" of growth could disguise grooming by escalating involvement.

"[The] connection between art and the moral and spiritual life has preoccupied Sangharakshita ... Aesthetic appreciation is a key dimension of mindfulness." (pp. 18 & 24)

- Framing aesthetics and imagination as spiritual tests ties personal boundaries to progress.

"All members of the Triratna Buddhist Order have been acknowledged to be Going for Refuge ... effectively." (p. 39)

- Ordination as recognition of "spiritual" readiness could systematise grooming, per the Walden dissertation on manipulative traits.

We find therefore a moderate alignment with the trait of 'grooming disguised as spiritual growth' in this essay. It sets out a systemic rather than a conspiratorial mechanism, but this could give rise to the normalising of exploitation under a "spiritual" guise.

Conclusion: Moderate to High

The essay exhibits moderate to high alignment to cult-like traits, particularly through charismatic centring of Sangharakshita, ideological reframing around imagination, ego dissolution, and all-or-nothing commitment. It could create dependency by urging radical rejection of external traditions and immersion in Triratna's unique path, potentially leading to insularity. However, it emphasises empathy, individual discovery, and "*as if*" philosophy (p. 14), which could counteract control if practiced openly. In Triratna, where this is "essential reading," it might subtly contribute to an atmosphere of control, especially given historical controversies.

BUDDHOPHANY

Cult-Like Trait Analysis

The document "Buddhophany: A Communication from Sangharakshita to the Triratna Buddhist Order and Community"[108] is a directive from Sangharakshita outlining principles derived from Subhuti's article on "Re-imagining the Buddha." It is presented as essential guidance for Order members, emphasising a reorientation of spiritual practices around Sangharakshita's interpretation of Buddhism. While ostensibly aimed at fostering a culturally relevant and imaginative approach to the Dharma, the document's language, structure, and imperatives can subtly contribute to cult-like dynamics within Triratna. Overall, the document exhibits moderate to high potential for cultivating insularity and dependency, particularly through its authoritative tone and emphasis on Sangharakshita's centrality, though it also includes elements promoting individual imagination that could mitigate outright control if interpreted liberally.

Charismatic Leader (Moderate to High Alignment)

The document reinforces Sangharakshita's role as an indispensable, charismatic guide, aligning with traits described in Hassan's BITE model and Singer's work, where leaders build emotional bonds and position themselves as authoritative interpreters. Sangharakshita signs the document as "Sd Urgyen Sangharakshita," invoking his ordained name and authority, and frames the principles as emerging from his discussions with Subhuti: "I have been very pleased that Subhuti's article on 'Re-imagining the Buddha', expounding ideas I had discussed with him, has been received with so much interest." This

positions him as the originator of these "crucial" ideas, with Subhuti as a mere expounder, fostering dependency on his personal vision.

Furthermore, he mandates adoption: "I would like all Order members to reflect upon and discuss these principles and to put them into effect within their own spiritual lives and in their teaching and practice within the Triratna Buddhist Community." This directive language implies that true spiritual progress hinges on aligning with his insights, potentially deepening emotional rapport and leader-follower dependency. While not overtly self-aggrandising, the document's structure as a "communication" from the founder to the entire Order elevates his voice as irreplaceable, which could contribute to a cultish atmosphere by discouraging independent interpretation outside his framework.

The document demonstrates moderate to high alignment to the 'charismatic leader' trait. It elevates Sangharakshita's authority by presenting the principles as derived from his personal discussions and mandating their implementation across the Order, which could foster dependency on his charismatic guidance.

Ideological Manipulation (High Alignment)

Sangharakshita reframes Buddhist doctrines to centre his own presentation, using loaded language that promises liberation while subtly enforcing a unique Triratna orthodoxy, akin to Lifton's "loading the language" and Montell's analysis of jargon in cultish groups. For instance, he asserts that practices "depend on principles derived from the Buddha himself, on the basis of my own presentation of the Buddha's teaching." This elevates his interpretation as the authoritative bridge to the historical Buddha, potentially manipulating members' understanding by tying doctrinal validity to his personal lens.

The document also introduces concepts like "hypostases" for archetypal figures: "The Archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas … are all to be understood as 'hypostases' or imaginative embodiments of the Buddha's Enlightened experience and qualities." This reframing discourages direct engagement with Mahāyāna traditions, insisting that such figures "cannot therefore be truly understood without there first being a deep understanding of, and feeling for, the Buddha of history." By mandating this sequence, it reshapes ideology to prioritise Triratna-specific metaphors, which could normalise manipulation by binding members' spiritual vocabulary to Sangharakshita's paradigm, limiting external perspectives and fostering insularity.

The document demonstrates high alignment to the 'ideological manipulation' trait. Through reframing concepts like "hypostases" and insisting on practices based solely on "my own presentation of the Buddha's teaching," the document loads language to align doctrine exclusively with Sangharakshita's interpretation, potentially manipulating members' worldview.

Suppression of Dissent (Moderate Alignment)

While not explicitly punishing disagreement, the document pathologises alternative approaches as insufficient or misguided, echoing Lalich's "bounded choice" and Deikman's framing of doubt as a barrier. Sangharakshita warns against relying on external traditions: "The practical test of this point is whether or not some people feel any need to refer to Tibetan or other teachers and sources to do their practices properly … or whether or not they see that tradition as a source of authority for what they are doing." This implies that seeking outside guidance indicates a failure to grasp Triratna's principles, poten-

tially stifling critical inquiry by framing it as a personal shortcoming.

Additionally, the call to "put them into effect" under institutional direction — "Work on developing this new approach, under the direction of the Public Preceptors, needs to start immediately" — suggests a top-down enforcement that could suppress organic dissent. Members who resist evolving away from traditional *sadhana* might be seen as clinging to outdated moulds, as the document encourages continuation only if it aligns with the new principles, thereby engineering skepticism toward non-conforming views as an internal obstacle to progress.

The document therefore demonstrates a moderate alignment to the 'suppression of dissent' trait. While not overtly punitive, the "practical test" for reliance on external traditions implies that deviation or external referencing indicates a failure, which could subtly discourage critical thinking without strong enforcement mechanisms.

Us vs. Them (High Alignment)

The document strongly promotes an 'us vs. them' dichotomy by distancing Triratna from other Buddhist traditions, portraying them as culturally alien or irrelevant, which aligns with Barker's sociological observations and Lalich and Tobias's environmental controls. Sangharakshita declares: "The Triratna Buddhist Order and Community is not a continuation of the Tibetan tradition, or of any other particular Buddhist tradition. The particular iconographic, theoretical, and ritual frameworks of Tibetan or other traditions are not our reference point." This creates a sense of exceptionalism, emphasising Triratna's uniqueness through its "imagery, ceremonies, and rhetoric in common use."

He further cautions against "overuse of Tibetan imagery and styles," warning that it poses "our greatest

danger in this respect" by inhibiting development within "our own cultures." This framing positions external traditions as hostile to Triratna's authenticity, potentially deepening group reliance by depicting the outside world (e.g., Tibetan Buddhism) as unenlightened or obstructive, thus reinforcing isolation and insularity.

The article demonstrates high alignment to the 'us vs. them' trait. The explicit distancing from Tibetan and other traditions, labelling them as non-reference points and warning against their "overuse" as a "danger," strongly promotes an insular group identity against external Buddhist influences.

All-or-Nothing Loyalty (Moderate to High Alignment)

Sangharakshita demands total commitment to his reimagined framework, where partial engagement is deemed inadequate for true spiritual life, mirroring Hassan's emotional control and Singer's "love bombing" escalated to unwavering allegiance. He states: "A successful Dharma life requires an imaginative connection with the Goal, some definite sense of reality beyond self-clinging. If there is no such connection and sense then spiritual life becomes no more than a refinement of self-identity, at best." This binary implies that without full adoption of these principles, one's practice is superficial, pressuring members toward all-or-nothing loyalty.

The document also ties ordination and *sadhana* practice to this commitment: "We need to take further steps to develop an approach to sadhana practice, and to the initiatory aspect of ordination, that puts these principles into practice." By linking initiation to alignment with his vision, it escalates devotion, suggesting that true membership requires embracing the "new approach" fully, which could enforce loyalty through institutional demands.

The document has a moderate to high alignment to the 'all-or-nothing loyalty' trait. By stating that without the prescribed imaginative connection, spiritual life is merely "a refinement of self-identity, at best," and tying ordination to these principles, it demands full commitment, escalating devotion to the group's framework.

Ego Dissolution and Identity Remoulding (Moderate Alignment)

The emphasis on transcending "self-clinging" and remoulding imagination aligns with Lifton's identity breakdown and Stein's trauma bonding, where ego dissolution is framed as growth but reshapes individuals in the group's image. Sangharakshita promotes: "The development and engagement of imagination is one of the keys to spiritual life … Our effort should especially be to allow imagination to unfold naturally, not to force it into any particular iconographic mould." However, this is qualified by ensuring images arise "from our own cultural circumstances" under Triratna's principles, potentially refolding personal identity around group norms.

He insists on a "strong sense of the historical Buddha" first, so that "any archetypal forms they contemplated were experienced as hypostases of him." This process of breaking down prior attachments (e.g., to Tibetan figures) and rebuilding through Sangharakshita's lens could dissolve individual boundaries, fostering dependency by presenting it as enlightened progress.

A moderate alignment to the 'ego dissolution and identity remoulding' trait is apparent in this document. The encouragement to allow imagination to "unfold naturally" while requiring it to stem from the historical Buddha as per Triratna's lens could remould personal identity, but the emphasis on individual cultural arising offers some flexibility.

Grooming Disguised as Spiritual Growth (Moderate Alignment)

The document normalises a personalised, boundary-pushing approach to spiritual development, akin to Montell's grooming analysis and Lalich's "spiritual tests," where exploitation is framed as enlightening. Sangharakshita proposes: "rather than giving people 'off-the-peg' images from Mahāyāna tradition at the outset, we work with individuals to find images that express those aspects of the ideal of Enlightenment that most strongly appeal to them or are most appropriate to them." This individualised mentoring, especially in ordination, could disguise grooming by building intimate trust under the guise of tailored growth.

Tied to "Effective Going for Refuge" via Sangharakshita's interpretation, it encourages vulnerability: "People should be encouraged to focus their practice on the historical Buddha … until they have developed this appreciation." This systemic process, directed by Public Preceptors, might exploit attachments, normalising deeper involvement as spiritual necessity.

The document has a moderate alignment to the 'grooming disguised as spiritual growth' trait. The shift to personalised *sadhana* under Preceptor direction, framed as tailored enlightenment, might normalise intimate mentoring that exploits vulnerability, though it appears systemic rather than targeted.

Conclusion: Moderate to High

On a scale of low to high alignment to cult-like traits, "Buddhophany" rates moderately high. It subtly weaves traits like charismatic authority, ideological reframing, and "us vs. them isolation into a directive that mandates

adoption, potentially fostering dependency and insularity within Triratna. While elements like encouraging natural imagination could promote autonomy, the overarching emphasis on Sangharakshita's presentation as the core reference risks creating a bounded, leader-centric environment. This is not inherently conspiratorial but is likely to emerge as an unintended by-product of fervent commitment to a unique Buddhist vision.

INITIATION INTO A NEW LIFE: THE ORDINATION CEREMONY IN SANGHARAKSHITA'S SYSTEM OF SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Cult-Like Trait Analysis

The document "Initiation into a New Life: The Ordination Ceremony in Sangharakshita's System of Spiritual Practice" (final revision November 2018)[109] is a key text authored by Subhuti, based on discussions with Sangharakshita. It serves as essential reading for aspiring Order members, outlining the ordination process as the "crux" of Sangharakshita's teachings. The paper emphasises ordination as a transformative ritual embodying lifelong commitment to Sangharakshita's unique interpretation of Buddhism, framed through concepts like "Going for Refuge," stages of spiritual practice (Integration, Positive Emotion, Spiritual Death, Spiritual Rebirth), and alignment with "Karma Niyama" and "Dharma Niyama" processes.

From a traditional Buddhist perspective, the idea of needing a "Spiritual Death" seems quite bizarre. In his book *The Art of Living*, Thich Nhat Hanh — the Vietnamese founder of another large Western Buddhist movement — has this to say:

> "The self does not need to die. The self is just an idea, an illusion, a wrong view; a notion; it is not reality. How can something that is not there die? We do not need to kill the self, but we can remove the illusion of a separate self by gaining a deeper understanding of reality."[110]

While the document presents itself as a clarification of Buddhist practice within Triratna, it exhibits elements that could foster a cult-like ideology. Drawing on the research framework established in the chapter "Cultish Commitments", I shall assess the degree to which the text contributes to these. Overall, the document moderately contributes to cult-like dynamics — not through overt coercion but through subtle mechanisms that promote insularity, dependency on Sangharakshita's lineage, and reframing of personal autonomy as spiritual surrender. This is amplified by its role as mandatory reading, potentially normalising these elements for new members.

1. Charismatic Leader (Moderate to High Alignment)

The document strongly elevates Sangharakshita as an indispensable, almost infallible guide, aligning with Hassan's BITE model and Singer's emphasis on charisma building dependency. Sangharakshita's message in the opening endorses Subhuti's paper as faithfully representing his views, positioning him as the ultimate authority: "I am very pleased once again to introduce to you an article written by Subhuti, on the basis of conversations I have had with him … Subhuti has very faithfully expressed my point of view." This creates a rapport where Sangharakshita's "particular presentation of the Buddha's Dharma" (p. 3) is central, defining the Order as "the 'community of the disciples and disciples of disciples of Urgyen Sangharakshita'" (p. 3). Subhuti's note reinforces this by noting Sangharakshita's "attention to detail" and

final approval, even in his last days (p. 4: "Publishing this at this time is poignant indeed, especially knowing it was one of Bhante's last acts to try to go through it.").

The essay shows a moderate to high alignment with the 'charismatic leader' trait by fostering emotional bonds to Sangharakshita as the lineage's origin, potentially discouraging independent interpretation. It mirrors the "dark triad" traits in charismatic leadership by implying his vision is "vast and majestic" (p. 4), making him indispensable.

2. Ideological Manipulation (High Alignment)

The text reframes Buddhist doctrines through Sangharakshita's lens, using loaded language like "Effective Going for Refuge" and "Spiritual Death/Rebirth" to enforce a specific worldview, akin to Lifton's "loading the language" and Montell's analysis of jargon normalising control. Ordination is portrayed as the sole path to true commitment: "Ordination, in the Buddhist context, is the conscious and wholehearted embracing of this evolutionary momentum — an act of Going for Refuge … that is effective because one has sufficient psychological integration" (p. 5). It dismisses traditional Buddhist ordinations as a "progressive loss of understanding," positioning Sangharakshita's system as superior: "There is then … no need for different ordination ceremonies — the various kinds of ordination found in Buddhist tradition often representing a progressive loss of understanding of the full significance of Going for Refuge" (pp. 5-6).

The revision process emphasises moving away from Tibetan influences to Sangharakshita's "distinctive presentation" (p. 3), warning against misunderstandings that could imply "Buddha nature" without prior stages (pp. 3-4). This manipulates ideology by insisting on a hierarchical, linear path tied to his teachings, potentially

binding members emotionally as per Stein's attachment exploitation. The document shows a high alignment to the 'ideological manipulation' trait as it subtly discourages external perspectives, reframing diversity as dilution.

3. Suppression of Dissent (Moderate Alignment)

While not explicitly punishing doubt, the document pathologises incomplete commitment as a personal failing, echoing Lalich's "bounded choice" and Deikman's framing of disagreement as a barrier. It urges deep study and "retraining" for preceptors: "I ask all Order members to study this article very deeply … This really does mean a *retraining* … and I ask you all to take this very seriously (p. 1). Provisional commitment is dismissed as insufficient: "**Provisional** Going for Refuge arises in moments of temporary inspiration … but this does not have enough weight behind it to be sustained" (p. 7). Effective commitment requires full alignment: "To move from the Provisional to the Real stage requires the conscious commitment of Effective Going for Refuge" (p. 8).

This subtly suppresses critical thinking by framing doubt or partial engagement as a lack of "psychological integration" (p. 5), stifling inquiry. The paper's alignment the the 'suppression of dissent' trait is moderate as it encourages self-application but implies orthodoxy through "unity and continuity" (p. 3), potentially engineering skepticism as an internal obstacle per Best.

4. Us vs. Them (Moderate Alignment)

The text fosters an insular dichotomy by contrasting Triratna's "distinctive" path with external traditions, portraying the outside world as less enlightened, similar to Barker's isolation tactics and Lalich and Tobias's envir-

onmental controls. It seeks to "move decisively away from the theoretical, practical, and institutional context of Tantric Initiation, especially as found in the Tibetan tradition" (p. 2), while emphasising Triratna's uniqueness: "In the Triratna Buddhist Order, we are not practising in that framework, but have a different and distinctive one" (p. 2). The Order is defined inwardly: "We want to strengthen the unity of the Order by making sure there is a 'high degree of commonality' of practice and teaching" (p. 3).

This creates reliance on the group by implying external influences dilute purity, especially in a post-Sangharakshita future (p. 3: "as we enter a future without Sangharakshita"). The article has a moderate alignment to the 'us vs. them' trait as it doesn't overtly demonise outsiders but reinforces insularity through "shared Dharmic experience" (p. 2-3).

5. All-or-Nothing Loyalty (High Alignment)

The document demands total, lifelong devotion, aligning with Hassan's emotional control and Singer's "love bombing" via escalating commitment. Ordination embodies "a lifelong and effective commitment to a Dharma 'career'" (p. 6), with stages requiring full energy: "Commitment is gradual, engaging more and more of one's energies … **Effective** Going for Refuge takes place on the basis of … sufficient integration of one's energies" (pp. 7-8). It urges application "fully and deeply to yourselves: the Karmic work … and more especially the explicitly Dharmic work" (p. 1).

Partial loyalty is insufficient: "At the later stage of Real Going for Refuge, progress is spontaneous … But … progress is entirely dependent on a constant application of willed effort" (p. 8). This escalates to all-or-nothing allegiance, per Pierre's "Cults of Personality." The

article therefore aligns highly with the trait of 'all-or-nothing loyalty', as ordination is framed as an irreversible transformation.

6. Ego Dissolution and Identity Remoulding (High Alignment)

Central to the text is "Spiritual Death and Rebirth," encouraging the breakdown of the self for remoulding, as in Lifton's identity breakdown and Stein's trauma bonding. Ordination enacts this: "The elements of Spiritual Death and Rebirth should be explicitly embodied in daily meditation" (p. 2). Stages progress to non-egoistic states: "Dharma Niyama processes are first felt as a pull to self-transcendence … [undermining] one's own ego-clinging" (p. 7). Real commitment offers "a spontaneous flow of increasingly non-egoistic volitions" (p. 7).

This remoulds identity under the guise of growth: "One simply needs to work that out more and more fully at every stage and in every aspect of one's life" (p. 6). The essay shows high alignment to the trait of 'ego dissolution and identity remoulding', as it normalises such changes as essential, potentially leading to dependency and shifts in personal relationships per the ICSA article.

7. Grooming Disguised as Spiritual Growth (Moderate to High Alignment)

The ordination process disguises boundary-pushing as enlightenment, per Montell's grooming deconstruction and Lalich's "spiritual tests." It frames progression as "initiation into a new life" (title), with practices tied to Sangharakshita's disciples: "We want the practices … to be directly connected to him, … recognising that Sangharakshita uses the term 'disciple' in a particular sense" (p. 3). New members take on meditations from a

"small pool" he taught (p. 3), emerging from "unfolding spiritual experience" (p. 2).

This systemic grooming uses "Effective Going for Refuge" to normalise exploitation as tests, akin to the Walden dissertation's manipulative traits. The article's alignment to the 'grooming disguised as spiritual growth' trait is moderate to high, as it is presented as voluntary but mandatory for entry, potentially pushing boundaries via "*retraining*" (p. 1).

Conclusion: Moderate to High

Overall the document contributes moderately to high to cult-like ideology, primarily through ideological manipulation, all-or-nothing loyalty, and ego dissolution, which interweave to create dependency and insularity. It substantiates these with Sangharakshita's authoritative voice and ritual emphasis, potentially amplifying control in a group having a history of abuse. However, its focus on personal effort and ethical practice tempers overt harm, distinguishing it from more extreme cults. While Buddhist-inspired, having such a document as essential reading material for entry into the Order risks unintended cultish by-products in implementation.

A SUPRA-PERSONAL FORCE OR ENERGY WORKING THROUGH ME

Cult-Like Trait Analysis

The document "'A supra-personal force or energy working through me': The Triratna Buddhist Community and the Stream of the Dharma"[111] by Subhuti is a philosophical and practical exploration of Buddhist concepts, particularly the *Dharma-niyāma* (a form of conditionality beyond egoic motivations), as experienced and taught by Sangharakshita. Based on conversations with Sangharakshita, it positions the Order as a community of his disciples (and their disciples) shaped by a "supra-personal force" that worked through him to establish it. Subhuti emphasises self-transcendence through intensive Dharma practice, service, and lifestyle, aiming to align members with this force for collective compassionate action. As essential reading for aspiring Order members, it promotes a unified vision where individual ego dissolves into the group's Dharmic flow.

While ostensibly rooted in traditional Buddhist ideas like Stream Entry and bodhicitta, the document reinterprets them to centre Sangharakshita's unique role and the Order's structure. It substantiates claims with dharmic-esque reasoning and encourages altruism, but elements like leader-centrism, ego-dissolution, and all-or-nothing commitment could foster dependency, insularity, and control if taken uncritically.

1. Charismatic Leader (High Alignment)

The document exhibits this trait to a high degree, portraying Sangharakshita as an indispensable conduit for a transcendent force, building emotional bonds through humility and authority. Subhuti writes "as a loyal disciple of Sangharakshita of more than forty years" (p. 10), elevating Sangharakshita's experiences as foundational. The Order is defined as "the community of his disciples and disciples of his disciples, practising according to his 'particular presentation of the Dharma'" (p. 1). This creates a lineage dependent on his "particular" vision.

Sangharakshita's Nagpur experience is presented as a humble yet profound example of the force: "I felt that I was not a person but an impersonal force" (p. 2), later reframed as "a supra-personal energy or force was working through me" (p. 9). Subhuti notes Sangharakshita's reluctance to claim perfection, using it as a "disclaimer" (p. 12), which disarms skepticism and fosters trust. The appendix reinforces this rapport, with Subhuti sharing personal vulnerability tied to Sangharakshita (p. 42: "My life seemed to be going exceptionally well … Bhante had appointed me the first Chairman … I felt intensely engaged … things began to come unstuck … there was an explosion of criticism of Bhante and, if anything, more vehemently of me"). This mirrors Hassan's BITE model, where charisma builds dependency, and Singer's rapport as recruitment, positioning Sangharakshita as the irreplaceable guide.

2. Ideological Manipulation (Moderate to High Alignment)

This trait appears to a moderate to high degree, reframing Buddhist doctrines to align with Sangharakshita's interpretation, using loaded language like "supra-

personal force" to discourage external views. Subhuti conflates Stream Entry and bodhicitta, rejecting traditional Mahāyāna distinctions as "erroneous" (p. 4: "He suggests that we can discard the traditional Mahāyāna distinction as erroneous and see Entering the Stream of the Dharma as essentially the same as the Arising of Bodhicitta"). This manipulates ideology to centre altruism on inner transformation via Sangharakshita's schema.

Metaphors like "The Stream of the Dharma" (p. 4) and "impersonal force" (p. 2) "load the language" (per Lifton), implying a dynamic process beyond ego, but warning against reification (p. 4: "The term 'bodhicitta' — particularly when referred to as 'The Bodhicitta' — is a metaphor that is easily reified"). Yet, it elevates the Order as its embodiment (p. 13: "The Order will continue 'literally' to be the thousand-armed, eleven-headed Avalokitesvara"). This echoes Montell's "jargon normalises manipulation" and Stein's attachment exploitation, binding members to Triratna's "particular presentation" (p. 1) as the true path.

3. Suppression of Dissent (Low to Moderate Alignment)

The document shows this to a low to moderate degree, pathologising doubt as ego-clinging without explicit punishment. Self-clinging is the root of suffering (p. 17: "The basic structure of ordinary consciousness is focused on self … The notion of self is, however, a construction"), implying criticism or hesitation stems from "illusion" (p. 1: "dominated by the illusion that one has an independent and ultimately substantial self-identity"). This could frame dissent as a "personal failing" (per Lalich's bounded choice).

Subhuti acknowledges problems (p. 37: "One can easily pick out so many defects and problems in each one"),

but redirects to the supra-personal (p. 37: "something else does shine through"). The emphasis on "spiritual death" (p. 29: "real spiritual death") might engineer doubt as an "internal obstacle" (per Best). There is little direct suppression, but the narrative discourages questioning by tying it to self-delusion, aligning with Deikman's punishment of disagreement.

4. Us vs. Them (Moderate Alignment)

This trait is present to a moderate degree, creating dichotomies between the unenlightened world and the Order's transcendent path. *Pṛthagjana* ("common worldling") vs *ārya* (p. 1: "The transition from *pṛthagjana* to *ārya* is then, most essentially, a movement from a consciousness dominated by the illusion of an ultimately real self to one that has no such illusion") frames outsiders as dominated by "self-oriented motivations" (p. 3).

The Order is set apart as disciples practicing Sangharakshita's "particular presentation" (p. 1), with the world as hostile or unenlightened:

> "[As] 'a common worldling', [one is] dominated by the illusion that one has an independent and ... substantial self-identity ... craves whatever appears to provide greater happiness and security and ... hates whatever threatens or causes pain. Whatever experiences tend to reveal the impermanence even of that self-identity are ignored or controverted." (p. 1)

Subhuti contrasts mundane charity with true Dharma service (p. 23: "Highly meritorious as this is however, it is not, in itself, service of the Dharma"). This echoes Barker's isolation tactics and Lalich and Tobias's environmental controls, deepening reliance on the group.

5. All-or-nothing Loyalty (High Alignment)

The article demonstrates a high degree of alignment here, demanding total commitment to the "supra-personal force" through intensive engagement. Subhuti calls for "wholehearted Dharma practice" (p. 32) and "intensity of our own efforts" (p. 30: "the sheer intensity of our engagement will bring us up against our underlying self-clinging"). Bodhicitta is "Irreversible" (p. 4), implying no turning back.

Lifestyle must be "wholeheartedly dedicated" (p. 38: "a lifestyle wholeheartedly dedicated to the Dharma"), with partial involvement insufficient (p. 22: "One needs to give up one's self-clinging in a very practical and concrete way"). This aligns with Hassan's emotional control and Singer's love bombing, escalating devotion to the Order's demands for full surrender (p. 29: "real spiritual death and real spiritual rebirth").

6. Ego Dissolution and Identity Remoulding (High Alignment)

This is central, aligning to a high degree, framing breakdown of self as growth. "Spiritual death" dissolves ego (p. 29: "We will have begun to die spiritually, reaching the point at which those defensive reactions can no longer sustain the walls of self"). The Order remoulds identity in its image (p. 13: "allowing what appears as that supra-personal force or energy to work through one").

Subhuti's appendix describes his own "fragmenting" as positive (p. 42: "I broke down — or rather broke up, in the sense of fragmenting"). This ties to Lifton's identity breakdown and Stein's trauma bonding, guised as "real self-transcendence" (p. 24), exploiting attachment for remoulding.

7. Grooming Disguised as Spiritual Growth (Moderate Alignment)

The article aligns to a moderate degree here, presenting "Effective Going for Refuge" (p. 1) as tests normalising boundary-pushing. Intensive communities and lifestyles (p. 34: "living in a single-sex community, working in a team-based Right Livelihood business") could groom via "spiritual tests" (per Lalich), framed as aligning with the force (p. 30: "tension that … could seem unbearable").

Subhuti's journey normalises vulnerability (p. 44: "something new could emerge"), echoing Montell's grooming, systemically tying growth to Sangharakshita's path.

Conclusion: Moderate to High

The document aligns with a cult-like ideology to a moderate to high degree, blending Buddhist selflessness with elements that could foster dependency and control. It substantiates claims politically incorrectly — e.g., rejecting traditions as "just so stories" (p. 5) — but risks insularity by centring everything on Sangharakshita's force and the Order's collective transcendence. While promoting compassion, it could amplify cultish dynamics if members interpret ego-dissolution as unquestioning loyalty. Balanced application might mitigate this, but as essential reading, it shapes an ideology where the group supersedes the individual.

THE DHARMA REVOLUTION AND THE NEW SOCIETY

Cult-Like Trait Analysis

"The Dharma Revolution and the New Society"[112] by Subhuti, based on talks given in 2010, is presented as essential reading for aspiring members of the Triratna Buddhist Order. The document draws heavily on the life and teachings of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the Indian leader who led mass conversions of Dalits to Buddhism in 1956, and Sangharakshita. It frames Buddhism and particularly the Dharma as a revolutionary force capable of transforming society through principles like liberty, equality, and fraternity, rooted in karmic and dharmic conditionality. Subhuti advocates for Buddhists to target marginalised groups, societal attitudes, and spiritually aspiring individuals, while building "nuclei of a new society" within Triratna communities to support this work.

While the text emphasises empowerment, ethical living, and social justice — aligning with mainstream Buddhist ideals — it could inadvertently contribute to cult-like dynamics within Triratna if interpreted rigidly or exclusively. Overall, the document shows moderate alignment to cult-like elements, primarily through its promotion of insularity and reverence for foundational figures, though it also encourages outward engagement and critical thinking.

Charismatic Leader (Moderate Alignment)

The document elevates Ambedkar and Sangharakshita as exemplary figures, positioning them as indispensable

guides whose insights shape Triratna's approach. This mirrors Hassan's BITE model and Singer's emphasis on charisma building dependency, as Subhuti portrays them as rare, lion-like individuals who stood alone against adversity, inspiring followers to emulate their "confidence" and "conviction." Consider the following quotes:

> "Dr. Ambedkar definitely had strength of that kind — and he needed it: he had to fight alone and stand alone" (p. 20).

> "Urgyen Sangharakshita has here a distinctive strategy, based firmly on traditional principles" (p. 20).

> "We have learned from our own teacher, Urgyen Sangharakshita" (p. 3).

This reverence could foster emotional bonds and leader-follower dependency, especially since the text is required reading for aspirants. However, it does not demand blind obedience, tempering the degree to moderate alignment with the 'charismatic leader' trait.

Ideological Manipulation (Moderate Alignment)

Subhuti reframes Buddhist doctrines (e.g., *karma*, *dharma niyamas*, *pratitya samutpada*) as a "revolutionary" blueprint for societal transformation, using loaded language like "Dharma Revolution" to promise liberation from materialism and injustice. This aligns with Lifton's "loading the language" and Montell's analysis of jargon normalising control, as the text contrasts Dharma with "nihilistic materialism" and urges its proclamation as the "truth" that reshapes minds. Consider the following quotes:

"The Dharma is the truth — the way things truly are ... bringing the principle of Karma and the principle of Dharma to bear within society so that they transform it in a progressive direction" (pp. 3-5).

"Real reform comes about only from a change in mental attitudes and outlook ... It is the Dharma that offers the firmest basis for that change of heart" (p. 3).

While promoting reason and science (e.g., citing Layard's happiness research, p. 12), the insistent framing of Dharma as the "only" path to an ideal society could discourage external perspectives, creating moderate ideological insularity.

Suppression of Dissent (Low Alignment)

The text encourages "confidence" in asserting Buddhist values but does not pathologise doubt or punish disagreement. Instead, it advocates reasonable dialogue and acknowledges failures, aligning minimally with Lalich's "bounded choice" or Deikman's punishment of dissent. Subhuti urges investigation of the Dharma through personal experience, not blind faith. Consider the following quotes:

"The Dharma simply asks us to recognise that reality works in ways that we can verify for ourselves by looking at our own experience" (p. 13).

"Our argument should combine reason, passionate conviction, and exemplification — even if it is but the example of one struggling to live by those values despite repeated failures" (p. 13).

In contrast to some of the other of the 'Seven Papers', this article promotes open inquiry, reducing the align-

ment to the 'suppression of dissent' trait to low, though rigid application within Triratna communities could amplify it and it must be read in conjunction with the other six papers.

Us vs. Them (High Alignment)

A strong dichotomy emerges between the "old society" (materialist, consumerist, nihilistic) and the "new society" (Dharma-based, ethical, fraternal), portraying the external world as hostile or unenlightened. This echoes Barker's isolation tactics and Lalich and Tobias's environmental controls, as Subhuti urges creating insulated "nuclei" to avoid dilution by mainstream influences, fostering group reliance. Consider the following quotes:

> "In the midst of the old society, we need to create miniature new societies: situations in which people live and work together on the basis of the Dharma. From those 'new societies in miniature', we can go out to transform the larger society around us" (p. 20).

> "It's terribly disheartening to live with people who deny your aspiration or are simply indifferent to it. Indifference is probably a more powerful sedative than opposition" (p. 21).

This "us vs. them" framing is prominent, potentially deepening insularity and making the degree of alignment high, especially in a group like Triratna with communal living and businesses.

All-or-nothing Loyalty (Moderate Alignment)

The document calls for "complete confidence" and immersion in Triratna's "nuclei," demanding escalating

commitment to the Dharma life, which could manifest as all-or-nothing loyalty per Hassan's emotional control and Singer's love bombing. It warns against partial engagement, emphasising full-time spiritual living for true transformation. Consider the following quotes:

> "We need to live around, and preferably work with, people who share the same aspiration, who are living out the same values, who are struggling to realise the same ideals in their lives" (p. 21).

> "The oasis is not a retirement home: it is a base where we can find refreshment, inspiration, and support for going out into the world — for bringing about the Dharma Revolution" (p. 23).

While encouraging gradual involvement (e.g., volunteering), the push for total dedication to Triratna's model rates as moderately aligned to the 'all-or-nothing loyalty' trait, potentially pressuring members to prioritise the group over external ties.

Ego Dissolution and Identity Remoulding (Moderate Alignment)

Subhuti describes relinquishing the "illusion of self" as essential for entering the "Stream of the Dharma," framing it as spiritual growth but aligning with Lifton's identity breakdown and Stein's trauma bonding. This could remould individuals in the group's image, especially through communal living where self-clinging is portrayed as a barrier. Consider the following quotes:

> "We begin to realise that the apparent fixity and clarity of self identity is really quite fluid and indefinable ... A new kind of motivation then takes over, as the Dharma emerges more

and more fully within our experience. We enter the 'Stream of the Dharma', flowing spontaneously onwards, beyond our self-oriented desires" (p. 4).

"This stream of Dharmic conditionality is an ever-present potentiality of human consciousness ... pulling at us all the time, but our self-preoccupation prevents us even from recognising it" (p. 17).

Presented positively, this mirrors Buddhist teachings, but in a required text for aspirants, it aligns moderately to identity shifts favouring group conformity.

Grooming Disguised as Spiritual Growth (Moderate Alignment)

The text promotes progressive involvement — from classes to full immersion in Triratna's "nuclei" — as "effective Going for Refuge," framing boundary-pushing (e.g., leaving mainstream society) as enlightening. This systemic process echoes Montell's grooming and Lalich's spiritual tests, using Sangharakshita's interpretations to deepen commitment. Consider the following quotes:

"It is our task to reach such people and give them the encouragement and opportunity they need... welcome them into the Sangha of those who are not satisfied with ordinary life" (pp. 17-18).

"It offers opportunities for contact to those who cannot or do not want to live or work full time with Dharma brothers and sisters ... And, whenever they are ready, they can move closer to the heart of that new society, if they want to" (p. 22).

This step-by-step escalation, disguised as growth, rates as moderate in alignment, potentially normalising ex-

ploitation if power imbalances arise. This is offset by the element of choice that is mentioned with respect to those not on the aspirant path who are less committed ("whenever they are ready … if they want to"), but this in itself could be the most subtle aspect to potential grooming — the friendly face, as it were, so long as other cult-like traits are aligning elsewhere down the path of commitment and dependency.

Conclusion: Moderate

Overall, the document exhibits a moderate degree of alignment to cult-like traits. Its strengths lie in promoting ethical, socially engaged Buddhism, drawing on verifiable principles and encouraging outward action, which counters extreme isolation. However, the high "us vs. them" framing, combined with moderate elements of leader reverence, ideological reframing, loyalty demands, ego dissolution, and progressive involvement, could create insularity and dependency if emphasised exclusively. As required reading, it may subtly condition aspirants to view Triratna as the sole path to societal transformation, mirroring cultish dynamics unintentionally through fervent commitment to ideals.

A BUDDHIST MANIFESTO: THE PRINCIPLES OF THE TRIRATNA BUDDHIST COMMUNITY

Cult-Like Trait Analysis

We now come to the last document of the Seven Papers: "A Buddhist Manifesto: The Principles of the Triratna Buddhist Community"[113] by Subhuti (2012), with a foreword by Sangharakshita. The manifesto outlines principles for renewing Buddhism in the modern world, centred on "Going for Refuge" to the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha). It is positioned as essential reading for aspiring Order members, emphasising a fresh start from traditional Buddhism's perceived decay.

Again, drawing on the preliminary research framework from the chapter "Cultish Commitments", I assess the document against key cult-like traits: charismatic leadership, ideological manipulation, suppression of dissent, "us vs. them" dichotomy, all-or-nothing loyalty, ego dissolution/identity remoulding, and grooming disguised as spiritual growth. These traits are not inherently negative in religious contexts but can become problematic if they promote dependency, insularity, or control.

The manifesto does not explicitly advocate harmful behaviours, and it invites dialogue with other Buddhists, suggesting openness. However, its emphasis on renewal through Sangharakshita's vision, deep commitment, and a new Sangha could subtly foster insularity, particularly

in a group setting where these principles are applied rigorously.

Overall, the document exhibits a moderate degree of alignment to cult-like ideology. It promotes fervent dedication to a reinterpreted Buddhism, potentially creating emotional bonds and group identity that mirror cult dynamics, but it lacks overt coercion, exploitation, or rejection of external critique. Instead, it frames its approach as a collaborative renewal. Below, I break this down by trait, with direct quotes from the document for evidence.

1. Charismatic Leader (High Alignment)

The manifesto elevates Sangharakshita as an indispensable figure whose personal experiences and insights justify a radical break from tradition. This aligns with Hassan's BITE model and Singer's emphasis on charisma building dependency, as Sangharakshita is portrayed as a reluctant but visionary traditionalist who alone discerned the need for renewal.

Sangharakshita's foreword positions him as the founder with unique authority: "When I founded what is now the Triratna Buddhist Community in 1967, I did so after many years experience of Buddhism in the East and some two or three of the nascent Buddhist movement in Britain. I had of course seen much that inspired me … However, I had also witnessed much more that was corrupt or decadent … It had become clear to me that, in many respects, a completely new start was required … Time has only reinforced my conclusion; indeed we must, I believe, be more radical still." (p. 9)

Subhuti reinforces this by crediting Sangharakshita's principles: "The Triratna Buddhist Community was founded by Urgyen Sangharakshita, in London in 1967, as a response to the contemporary world … Our teacher

has arrived at certain principles, which are the basis of our own approach." (pp. 11-12)

The back cover echoes this: "The Triratna Buddhist Community was founded by Urgyen Sangharakshita … Subhuti has worked closely with Urgyen Sangharakshita for some forty years and this booklet is a fruit of their recent collaboration."

This framing could encourage followers to view Sangharakshita as an irreplaceable guide, potentially leading to personality-centred devotion, though the document stresses principles over the individual.

The document shows high alignment to the 'charismatic leader' trait. It centres Sangharakshita as the visionary founder whose personal experiences and principles define Triratna's renewal. His foreword positions him as uniquely insightful, and Subhuti credits him extensively (e.g., "Our teacher has arrived at certain principles").

2. Ideological Manipulation (Moderate to High Alignment)

The text reframes core Buddhist doctrines (e.g., Going for Refuge) through Sangharakshita's lens, using loaded language like "renewal," "effective Going for Refuge," and "new Sangha" to prioritise Triratna's approach. This mirrors Lifton's "loading the language" and Montell's analysis of jargon normalising control, as it positions traditional Buddhism as inadequate while promising liberation via Triratna's "balanced" path.

On renewal as essential, Subhuti says: "The situation seems to call for renewal in the Buddhist world, faithful to the Buddha's own teaching, yet addressing the circumstances we find ourselves in now … This work of renewal is very important to us in the Triratna Buddhist Order

… We think these principles of renewal may be of wider interest." (p. 12)

Critiquing tradition while claiming fidelity, he states: "A renewal of Buddhism starts with the Buddha Shakyamuni and his teachings, before the doctrinal developments … Faithfulness to the Dharma does not mean merely preserving and continuing the forms in which it was originally presented … The tradition as a whole preserves those traces of decay as well as the signs of correction and renewal." (pp. 18 & 23)

Subhuti refers to a "balanced practice" as Triratna-specific: "It is important that practice of the Dharma is balanced if it is to be relevant and effective in contemporary circumstances … Striving for Enlightenment then must balance that quest for direct understanding of the unreal nature of the assumed metaphysical self with active giving up of self to the service of the Dharma." (pp. 28-29)

This could manipulate ideology by discouraging reliance on external traditions, subtly enforcing Triratna's "effective" and "balanced" framework as the true path.

The document shows moderate to high alignment to the 'ideological manipulation' trait. Core Buddhist concepts like "Going for Refuge" are reframed to prioritise Triratna's "effective" approach, critiquing traditional Buddhism as "decadent" or "corrupt" while claiming fidelity to the Buddha's essence (e.g., "A renewal of Buddhism starts with the Buddha Shakyamuni and his teachings, before the doctrinal developments").

3. Suppression of Dissent (Low Alignment)

While not explicitly punishing disagreement, the manifesto implies that questioning renewal or commitment reflects personal failing or attachment to decayed traditions. This echoes Lalich's "bounded choice" and

Deikman's pathologising of doubt, as progress is tied to full alignment with Triratna's principles.

There is no direct mention of dissent, but Sangharakshita's criticism of tradition implies resistance is backward: "I had also witnessed much more that was corrupt or decadent … monasticism in the Buddhist world is in urgent need of renewal, dominated as it can be by formalism, compromise with authority, and concern with property." (pp. 9 & 40)

The Sangha may subtly become a monitor: "One of the functions of Sangha, as we shall see later, is to ensure that each member is truly growing in the Dharma and growing in a balanced way … Sangha members can mutually reflect each other so that all may discover how to practise the Dharma more deeply." (pp. 29 & 36)

The document encourages unity over diversity: "Organisations will only be Dharmically effective if they are formed out of Sangha … The Arya or Bodhisattva Sangha apart, the Sangha that is most significant consists of all those who are putting their going for Refuge to the Three Jewels into effect." (pp. 37-38)

This could stifle critical thinking by framing non-alignment as insufficient commitment, though the document invites "reflection and comment" from outsiders (which I am happy to provide in the medium of this book.)

The document shows low alignment to the 'suppression of dissent' trait. The text invites dialogue with other Buddhists, without pathologising doubt. However, progress is tied to alignment with principles, implying non-commitment as a failing (e.g., "Commitment is the fundamental criterion for entry into the Sangha").

4. Us vs. Them (Moderate Alignment)

The manifesto creates a dichotomy between Triratna's renewed Buddhism and the "decadent" traditional world or consumerist society, portraying externals as hostile to true practice. This aligns with Barker's isolation tactics and Lalich and Tobias's environmental controls, fostering reliance on the group.

The modern world is portrayed as challenging: "The world today is very different from that in which Buddhism originated and flourished … the influence of Buddhism in its traditional heartlands has drastically decreased … Urban life for many all over the world is now often lonely and socially fragmented. These conditions are especially unsuitable for those trying to lead a Dharma life." (pp. 11 & 44)

Traditional Buddhism is seen as decayed: "The traditional Buddhist world generally assigns a lesser place to women … There is seldom much sympathy, outside societies that preserve traditional Buddhist culture, for those who want to live a Dharma life." (pp. 39 & 35)

Triratna is presented as a world transforming solution: "Demonstrating alternatives to consumer society that can model what the whole world could become … The ultimate aspiration of the Sangha is to turn society everywhere into a new society: to transform the whole world into the land of the Dharma." (p. 47)

This could deepen insularity by viewing the outside as unenlightened, though it advocates transforming society rather than withdrawing.

The document shows a moderate alignment to the 'us vs. them' trait. It dichotomises Triratna's renewed Buddhism against "decadent" traditions and consumerist society, portraying the external world as unsuitable for Dharma life (e.g., "Urban life for many all over the world is now often lonely and socially fragmented. These con-

ditions are especially unsuitable for those trying to lead a Dharma life”).

5. All-or-Nothing Loyalty (High Alignment)

Going for Refuge is depicted as requiring total life reorganisation, with partial engagement deemed ineffective. This reflects Hassan’s emotional control and Singer’s love-bombing, escalating devotion.

The successive stages of going for Refuge demand escalation: “To begin with, our going for Refuge may simply be the expression of cultural values — a positive influence upon us but with little depth … In time that may become effective, as we reorganise our lives around our commitment to the Three Jewels … As we go for Refuge more and more deeply, our confidence in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha becomes unshakeable.” (p. 14)

Commitment is the most important requirement for acceptance into the group: “Commitment is the fundamental criterion for entry into the Sangha … A renewed Sangha should accept people simply on the basis of their commitment.” (pp. 38-39)

Full dedication is demanded: “One takes up the monastic life so that one may devote all one’s time and energy to the Dharma … The changed cultural, social, and economic circumstances of the modern world demand that Buddhists today develop new institutions for living the Dharma life.” (pp. 41-42)

It is easy to see how this could give rise to demands for unwavering allegiance, potentially leading to all-or-nothing dynamics. The document shows high alignment to the ‘all-or-nothing loyalty’ trait. “Going for Refuge” demands total life reorganisation and escalating commitment, with partial engagement deemed ineffective (e.g., “As we go for Refuge more and more deeply, our confid-

ence in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha becomes unshakeable”).

6. Ego Dissolution and Identity Remoulding (Moderate Alignment)

The text promotes breaking ego-clinging as spiritual growth, aligning with Lifton’s identity breakdown and Stein’s trauma bonding, where self-dissolution reshapes identity in the group’s image.

The document contains explicit no-self teaching: “The Buddhist life is lived for the attainment of Bodhi, which consists in the final transcendence of all ego-clinging. The first and most important stage in real spiritual evolution is Stream Entry, when that ego-clinging is decisively broken.” (p. 29)

Remoulding through practice: “Once one lets go of that self-attachment, what is released is a stream of mental states that have less and less reference to self … Striving for Enlightenment then must balance that quest for direct understanding of the unreal nature of the assumed metaphysical self with active giving up of self to the service of the Dharma and, thereby, of all life.” (p. 29)

In a group context, this could remould identities around Triratna’s collective. However, since it relates to standard Buddhist doctrine it would be difficult to separate unhelpful cultish effects from beneficial progress.

The document shows moderate alignment to the ‘ego dissolution and identity remoulding’ trait. Transcendence of “ego-clinging” is emphasised as spiritual growth, remoulding identity around Dharma service, but balanced with altruism (e.g., “The Buddhist life is lived for the attainment of Bodhi, which consists in the final transcendence of all ego-clinging”).

7. Grooming Disguised as Spiritual Growth (Moderate Alignment)

"Effective Going for Refuge" and spiritual friendship are framed as paths to enlightenment but could normalise boundary-pushing, per Montell's grooming analysis and Lalich's "spiritual tests."

Subhuti frames spiritual friendship as a tool: "What needs to be stressed in a renewal of Buddhism is *kalyāna mitratā*, 'lovely friendship'… The experience of friendship and the development of communication are the basis for Sangha." (pp. 36 & 37)

Spiritual growth is rewarded via commitment: "We also need to communicate that human beings are capable of spiritual growth and that that growth consists essentially in self-transcendence … Practising the Dharma is not at all easy … we need to be in deep connection with those who see things in the same way that we do." (pp. 50 & 35)

Ultimately a systemic process applicable to every moment is suggested: "Going for Refuge is thus repeated again and again at every moment of our lives, carrying us through all the stages of the Path." (p. 15)

This could disguise grooming as mentorship, especially in "residential spiritual" communities, though it's presented positively. (p. 41) "Spiritual friendship" (*kalyāna mitratā*) is promoted as essential for growth, involving deep connections and mentorship, which could normalise boundary-pushing (e.g., "The experience of friendship and the development of communication are the basis for Sangha").

Conclusion: Moderate

In conclusion, the manifesto's call for renewal could inspire positive change but risks cult-like elements through its founder-centric narrative, demand for total commitment, and separation from "decadent" externals. The degree of alignment to cultish traits is moderate, as it promotes ethical friendship and societal transformation without evident malice. However, in practice, these ideas might amplify dependency if not balanced with external accountability.

SEVEN PAPERS IN SUMMARY

Cult-Like Trait Analysis

	Charismatic Leader	Ideological Manipulation	Suppression of Dissent	Us vs. Them	All-or-Nothing Loyalty	Ego Dissolution and Identity Remoulding	Grooming Disguised as Spiritual Growth	**Overall**
What is the Western Buddhist Order?	High (5/5)	High (5/5)	High (5/5)	High (5/5)	High (5/5)	Moderate (3/5)	Moderate (3/5)	**High (4.4/5)**
Revering and Relying Upon the Dharma	High (5/5)	High (5/5)	Moderate (3/5)	Moderate (3/5)	High (5/5)	Moderate (3/5)	Moderate (3/5)	**Moderate to High (3.9/5)**
Re-Imagining the Buddha	High (5/5)	High (5/5)	Low to Moderate (2/5)	Moderate (3/5)	Moderate (3/5)	High (5/5)	Moderate (3/5)	**Moderate to High (3.7/5)**
Buddhophany	Moderate to High (4/5)	High (5/5)	Moderate (3/5)	High (5/5)	Moderate to High (4/5)	Moderate (3/5)	Moderate (3/5)	**Moderate to High (3.9/5)**
Initiation into a New Life	Moderate to High (4/5)	High (5/5)	Moderate (3/5)	Moderate (3/5)	High (5/5)	High (5/5)	Moderate to High (4/5)	**High (4.1/5)**
A Supra-personal Force or Energy …	High (5/5)	Moderate to High (4/5)	Low to Moderate (2/5)	Moderate (3/5)	High (5/5)	High (5/5)	Moderate (3/5)	**Moderate to High (3.9/5)**
The Dharma Revolution …	Moderate (3/5)	Moderate (3/5)	Low (1/5)	High (5/5)	Moderate (3/5)	Moderate (3/5)	Moderate (3/5)	**Moderate (3/5)**
A Buddhist Manifesto …	High (5/5)	Moderate to High (4/5)	Low (1/5)	Moderate (3/5)	High (5/5)	Moderate (3/5)	Moderate (3/5)	**Moderate to High (3.4/5)**
Combined	**High (4.5/5)**	**High (4.5/5)**	**Moderate (2.5/5)**	**Moderate to High (3.8/5)**	**High (4.4/5)**	**Moderate to High (3.8/5)**	**Moderate to High (3.1/5)**	**Moderate to High (3.8/5)**

The table on the previous page contains a summary of the cult-like trait analysis of the Triratna Seven Papers. By mapping the ratings to a numerical scale from 1 to 5, we can take a mean of each trait and arrive at an overall rating for the combined set of papers.

The Seven Papers, taken together, constitute the foundational charter of the Triratna Buddhist Order. The aggregate analysis of all of the papers combined reveals consistent patterns that recur across the entire collection as a whole. Below is an aggregated assessment of each cult-like trait across the entire set of papers.

Charismatic Leader

Aggregate alignment: High (4.5/5)

Sangharakshita is consistently positioned as the irreplaceable defining teacher, the sole legitimate interpreter of the Dharma for this lineage, and the living embodiment of its "supra-personal force." The Order is defined explicitly as "the community of my disciples and the disciples of my disciples." His personal experiences are mythologised, his insights elevated above all other teachers (past or present), and his evolving interpretations treated as definitive. Even in papers authored by Subhuti, Sangharakshita remains the central, indispensable reference point. The language repeatedly returns to his unique spiritual authority, his "particular presentation," and the necessity of personal allegiance to him (directly or through his appointed hierarchy). This is the strongest and most consistent cult-like trait across all seven documents.

The pain that is felt by many because of Sangharakshita's abusive behaviour is made worse by having such a

leader-focused approach, where Order members and aspirants routinely speak in praise of this man.

Regularly reverencing Sangharakshita and ignoring the very vivid testimonies of his victims is to some, including myself, an extremely uncomfortable experience verging on psychological abuse. People who come to Triratna's centres who have survived sexual or psychological abuse, or who know someone who has survived it, are not going to be prepared for when their newfound meditation community turns into a source of internalised trauma as they gradually learn about the true nature of the history of abuse.

The Seven Papers serve to maintain the reverence and centrality of a man who abused disciples, and whose dharmic teachings have at times been highly questionable. This is a major source of ongoing harm and must be addressed, to allow the community to move away from doing harm and towards allowing the good that Triratna has to offer to flourish.

Ideological Manipulation

Aggregate alignment: High (4.5/5)

The papers systematically reframe traditional Buddhist concepts — Going for Refuge, lineage, reverence, spiritual hierarchy, the nature of the Buddha, ordination — through Sangharakshita's distinctive terminology and emphases ("Higher Evolution," "Cosmic Going for Refuge," "effective Going for Refuge," "supra-personal force," "the Stream of the Dharma," "the Dharma Revolution"). Traditional forms are frequently described as decadent, corrupt, or inadequate for modern conditions, while Triratna's approach is presented as the necessary renewal. Loaded language and mystifying jargon create an internal ideological world that is difficult to challenge

from outside and that implicitly delegitimises alternative Buddhist paths.

Suppression of Dissent

Aggregate alignment: Moderate (2.5/5)

Dissent is repeatedly framed as spiritual immaturity, lack of commitment, or failure to understand the "real" teaching. Disagreement with Sangharakshita on "significant issues" is expected to be brought to him personally; public criticism or propagation of alternative views can jeopardise Order membership. Exploration of other teachers is portrayed as lack of confidence or betrayal. While the tone is rarely overtly punitive, the cumulative message is that genuine spiritual progress requires unqualified acceptance of Sangharakshita's presentation. Doubt itself is subtly pathologised as ego-clinging or illusion.

Us vs. Them

Aggregate alignment: Moderate to High (3.8/5)

A sharp dichotomy is maintained between Triratna's "new society" (or "nuclei of a new society") and the "old society," between "effective" Going for Refuge and merely cultural or ethnic Buddhism, between the Order's "particular presentation" and all other presentations (which are implicitly inferior or contaminated). External Buddhist traditions are criticised as decayed; the wider world is materialistic, nihilistic, or hostile to true aspiration. Members are encouraged to live and work predominantly within Triratna structures to avoid dilution or contamination. The consistent message is that real spiritual

life is fully possible only within Triratna's unique ecosystem.

All-or-Nothing Loyalty

Aggregate alignment: High (4.4/5)

Commitment must be "narrow," "intense," "wholehearted," and "irreversible." Partial engagement is repeatedly described as insufficient or spiritually dangerous. Ordination and Order membership require total life-reorganisation around Sangharakshita's vision. The papers warn against "name-only" members, those who drift, or those who maintain external spiritual connections. The demand escalates progressively: from ethnic/cultural Going for Refuge, then to provisional, then to effective, then to cosmic/irreversible. The underlying message is that anything less than full immersion risks spiritual failure.

Ego Dissolution and Identity Remoulding

Aggregate alignment: Moderate to High (3.8/5)

The dissolution of the "fixed self" is presented not merely as a soteriological goal but as a practical requirement for entry into the true Sangha and the "Stream of the Dharma." Members are expected to allow a "supra-personal force" (explicitly linked to Sangharakshita's lineage) to work through them. Uniformity of understanding, practice, and loyalty to the founder's presentation is required for the Order to function as a genuine spiritual community. Individual autonomy is consistently subordinated to collective transcendence mediated through the founder's vision and the hierarchical structure.

Grooming Disguised as Spiritual Growth

Aggregate alignment: Moderate to High (3.1/5)

Intensive communal living, single-sex communities, team-based Right Livelihood businesses, prolonged ordination retreats, hierarchical "spiritual friendship," and gate-kept ordination processes are all presented as necessary conditions for "effective" practice. The progressive escalation of commitment is framed as natural spiritual development rather than recruitment strategy. Boundary-pushing (relocation, financial dependence, sexual experimentation in earlier decades, surrender of personal discernment) is normalised as "spiritual death and rebirth" or "allowing the supra-personal force to work through one." The risk of systemic grooming is inherent in the structure, even when no individual malice is present.

Potential Organisational Risks and Long-Term Consequences for Triratna

When foundational documents consistently exhibit moderate to high alignment (overall 3.8/5) with multiple cult-like traits, the following serious risks to both individuals and the organisation itself are present:

- **Institutionalised Dependency**
  Members are trained to see Sangharakshita (and by extension his appointed hierarchy) as the sole reliable source of authentic Dharma. This creates long-term vulnerability to abuse of power, even after the founder's death, because the system is structurally wired to defer to "the founder's vision" rather than to independent critical reason or consensual evolution.

- **Stifled Evolution and Adaptation**

By defining the Order as "the community of Sangharakshita's disciples practising according to his particular presentation," the papers effectively freeze the teaching at a particular historical moment. Future generations are discouraged from significant innovation, from dialogue with other lineages on equal terms, or from acknowledging serious ethical failures in the founder's conduct. The result is a movement that risks becoming increasingly sectarian and brittle.

- **Normalisation of High-Control Practices**

The cumulative effect of "us vs. them" framing, all-or-nothing loyalty demands, and the reframing of ego-dissolution as conformity is a culture in which intensive control mechanisms (residential communities, financial interdependence, hierarchical confession, gate-kept ordination) feel spiritually virtuous rather than potentially exploitative.

- **Reputational and Legal Vulnerability**

Documents that explicitly centralise authority in one historically compromised figure and discourage external engagement make the organisation appear defensive and cult-like to outsiders, hindering outreach and making it harder to attract new members or retain younger generations who value transparency and autonomy.

- **Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma**

The papers repeatedly assert that the Order's cohesion depends on fidelity to Sangharakshita's vision. This makes it structurally difficult to fully acknowledge, process, or move beyond past sexual and power abuse, because doing so would require questioning the founder

himself — something the foundational texts implicitly warn against.

- **Risk of Splintering or Collapse Upon Leadership Transition**

Because authority is ultimately personal rather than institutional or dharmic, the death of the founder or major scandals create existential crises rather than opportunities for renewal. The 2023 "Seven Papers Revisited" interview reveals that even senior figures now recognise the papers attracted "significant criticism" and needed "clarification," yet the original texts remain required reading — indicating the organisation is still structurally tethered to a personality-centric model.

In essence, when construed as a unified corpus, the Seven Papers articulate a rigorously authoritarian, personality-centric, and sectarian paradigm of Buddhist community — one exquisitely engineered to replicate the very pathologies that inflicted decades of harm upon FWBO/Triratna. These features are not peripheral or accidental; they constitute the load-bearing architecture itself. Until these foundational texts are radically revised or altogether superseded, the propensity for cultic dynamics will remain not merely historical but structurally inherent.

THE SEVEN PAPERS REVISITED

Rhetorical Strategies in Subhuti's Defence

The 2023 publication "The Seven Papers Revisited: Criticisms and Clarifications" presents itself as a candid interview between Jyotika, an Order member sympathetic to the Triratna project, and Subhuti, chief architect of the original Seven Papers. Spanning ninety-one pages, it purports to address criticisms with openness and humility. In practice, it functions as an exercise in rhetorical containment: every objection is acknowledged only to be reframed, minimised, or inverted, while the hierarchical, founder-centric model of the original Papers remains untouched. The chapter titles themselves perform much of the defensive work, transforming potential accusations into questions whose implied answer is "of course not."

What follows is a systematic examination of the principal rhetorical techniques deployed throughout the text, supported by direct quotation.

1. Rhetorical Question as Pre-emptive Strike

The chapter titles alone constitute the clearest example of this device:

- "Cult of Personality" (p. 31)
- "Conservation, Allegiance, Cohesion: Dirty Words?" (p. 63)
- "System of Practice: Closing Down or Opening Out?" (p. 73)
- "Individuality: Glory of the Human Realm?" (p. 56)

By casting the issue as a question whose obvious answer is negative, Subhuti inoculates the reader against the criticism before it is even articulated. The critic is positioned as someone who finds ordinary and necessary qualities somehow shameful or regressive. The device is especially potent because it enlists Buddhist non-attachment in its own defence: if one objects to "allegiance" or "cohesion," the title suggests, the fault lies in one's own ego rather than in the proposed structure.

2. Straw-Man Construction and Reversal

Subhuti repeatedly constructs a simplified or exaggerated version of the critics' position — one that is easier to refute — and then dismantles it, thereby presenting Triratna's stance as the only reasonable, spiritually mature alternative.

The most concentrated example appears in the chapter titled "Conservation, Allegiance, Cohesion: Dirty Words?" (pp. 63-72). The very heading performs the device: it implies that critics regard these perfectly normal and necessary qualities as inherently suspect or even shameful ("dirty words"), as though any call for continuity or loyalty were automatically tainted by authoritarianism. By framing the objection in this way, Subhuti casts the critic as someone naïvely or reactively rejecting something indispensable to any serious spiritual community.

On pages 64-65 he develops the straw man further:

> "At the same time, there are legitimate grounds for trying to introduce something new, but it mustn't be done on the basis of subjective likes and dislikes ... Our consumerist mentality tends to make us feel that the latest iPhone is the best

and a ‘must have’ … people have lost confidence … which will tend to mean that they look for somewhere new to go.”

Critics, in this rendering, are portrayed as consumerist novelty-seekers driven by “subjective likes and dislikes” rather than by principled concern about unaccountable power. Having erected this caricature, Subhuti reverses the polarity: Triratna’s insistence on fidelity to Sangharakshita’s “particular presentation of the Dharma” becomes the wise middle way that safeguards the movement’s integrity without sliding into rigid conservatism.

The actual criticisms almost never take the form Subhuti attributes to them. They do not reject cohesion or allegiance in principle; they object to specific mechanisms that concentrate authority in a single lineage in perpetuity. By reframing the critique as a blanket aversion to continuity itself, Subhuti avoids engaging those concrete mechanisms and instead argues against a phantom opponent who is easy to defeat.

The same pattern recurs. In the “Cult of Personality” chapter the charge is reduced to a narrow Stalin-era definition (p. 33), allowing Subhuti to declare the label inapplicable while preserving every structural feature that gives rise to the concern. In the “System of Practice” section the possibility of a decentralised yet coherent order is omitted; the reader is offered only Triratna’s hierarchical model or chaotic dissolution.

3. Minimisation through Selective Sampling

Subhuti repeatedly emphasises that “most people” welcomed the Seven Papers and that criticism came from a disaffected minority:

"The publication of the Seven Papers was warmly welcomed by many in Triratna, who appreciated the clarity and direction they provided ... Other people, however, were critical" (Foreword, p. 5).

"I think there is inevitably a tension ... within which most of the Order is functioning healthily" (pp. 33-34).

The critic is repositioned as unrepresentative, while the leadership speaks for a contented, silent majority.

4. Pathologising the Critic

Discomfort with hierarchy or allegiance is presented as evidence of the critic's own spiritual immaturity or cultural contamination:

"We've inherited an idea of an individual as a completely free agent and of us exercising our 'will' in a completely abstract and open way. But we never do." (p. 57)

"The language of the individual ... [has] been pulled far too much in the direction of individualism, and that plays into a very strong mood in our culture." (p. 62)

Resistance to the Seven Papers is thereby transformed from a structural concern into a personal failing — ego-clinging masquerading as principled critique.

5. False Dichotomy / Slippery Slope

The reader is repeatedly offered only two possibilities: accept the hierarchical model or watch the Order dissolve into incoherence:

"If the Order loses our shared framework of understanding, it will lose a huge amount of potency. It will be very diffi-

cult to have a system of linked Centres or a system of training for Ordination ...” (pp. 74-75)

> “If you don’t have that [common framework] then you are working out your own disquiets and inspirations, and if you start spreading this then you risk diluting the integrity of the Order.” (p. 68)

No third option — a non-personality-centric, non-exclusionary, genuinely decentralised yet coherent order — is ever acknowledged.

6. Compartmentalisation (“the supra-personal force”)

When pressed on the charge of cult of personality, Subhuti deploys the familiar Triratna distinction: reverence is not for the man but for the supra-personal force that worked through him:

> “What we have at our centre is the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha as Refuges, not Bhante.” (p. 34)

This allows the movement to retain every mechanism of a personality cult — perpetual loyalty to one teacher’s “particular presentation of the Dharma,” exclusion of alternative teachings — while denying the label. The sleight of hand is complete when Subhuti adds that any stronger personality cult would be a “betrayal of what is essential about Triratna” (p. 37), as if the existing structures were not already its most conspicuous expression.

7. Concession as Deflection

Minor concessions are offered only to demonstrate good faith:

> "I don't like the terminology of 'conservation'. 'Continuity' would be my preferred word." (p. 64)

> "that he has a personality and that personality has sometimes imprinted itself too strongly ... largely not as Bhante himself would've wished." (p. 34)

We also are offered the idea that if one finds a new practice beneficial, keep it to yourself until you have passed through the inspiration stage and then perhaps consider discussing it with others to see if it's something that could be of "real benefit to the community." However, even this is seen as a difficulty since "holding a spiritual community such as ours together, which covers different nationalities and cultures, is extremely complex." (p. 66) This is a clear example of attachment to group identity view being a hindrance to freedom.

The concessions are pivoted into proof of openness ('See how willing we are to clarify!') while the substance of the criticism remains unaddressed.

8. Appeal to Necessity ("every tradition does it")

Hierarchical or allegiance-demanding features are normalised by comparison:

> "The most straightforward answer is that in the Guru/Disciple relationship there is an element of ritualised deference that can be quite artificial ... I hope we don't do that in Triratna." (p. 32)

The tu quoque fallacy is dressed as comparative religion: A personal anecdote of the appearance of hypocrisy in Tibetan guru devotion is cited to make Triratna's own

version appear moderate, even though most traditions do not constitutionally define themselves as "the community of my disciples and the disciples of my disciples" in perpetuity.

9. Linguistic Rehabilitation

Concepts that cause alarm — allegiance, cohesion, reverence, hierarchy — are repeatedly re-branded as noble:

> "putting your individual needs at the service of the community doesn't mean that anybody needs to lose anything." (p. 66)

> "we need to have a common area of understanding in the fundamental views ... the language that we use to describe our experience." (p. 67)

The very words that trigger concern are declared "dirty" only to those still infected by secular individualism. The effect is to make the critic appear culturally contaminated rather than ethically alert.

Conclusion

In essence, "The Seven Papers Revisited" is not a genuine engagement with criticism but a masterclass in rhetorical containment. Every device serves the same end: the hierarchical, founder-centric model of the original Seven Papers remains intact, now wrapped in friendlier language that makes renewed dissent appear spiritually immature or historically ignorant. The Seven Papers stand, only now rendered immune to serious challenge.

With the original Seven Papers remaining central to the ordination process one would be forgiven for inferring that there was a desire to maintain the status-quo and point any critics to Revisited on a case-by-case basis.

The harm wrought by Sangharakshita's enduring centrality and the unabated public veneration he receives is most acutely visible in those followers — like myself — who eventually reach the point where the internal contradiction can no longer be borne, and in those who have already left the movement yet remain deeply wounded by his conduct.

Additionally, his continuing iconic presence in Triratna centres worldwide — through photographs, altar portraits, ritualised praise, and unquestioning reverence — inflicts ongoing damage upon the public perception of Buddhism in the West among those who are aware of the grave ethical failings that make such exaltation indefensible.

Without a significant revision of the Triratna system of practice as regards Sangharakshita's centrality and the Seven Papers' authority and necessity in the ordination process, such harms will continue as "those in the Order and Movement who have a reverence for Bhante, verging on the cultic" (Revisited p. 31) continue to celebrate him to their own unmindful satisfaction.

RECLAIMING THE DHARMA

Towards a Questioning Western Buddhism

By now, I trust you have come to recognise the profound and multifaceted difficulties I and many others have faced and continue to face in seeking to deepen our spiritual practice within Triratna. The highly inappropriate veneration of its abusive founder, together with the distinctly cult-like features that persist within the movement, is, in my considered view, causing real harm to many who approach its centres — most especially to those who already carry the wounds of abuse themselves. In consequence, the authentic transmission of the Dharma is being gravely impeded throughout the Western world.

The Buddha gave clear advice on how we are to assess the worthiness of our teacher. He emphasised how worthy teachers show virtues like compassion, integrity, and freedom from defilements — and how unworthy teachers may be hypocritical, negligent, or self-serving.

The *Lohicca Sutta (To Lohicca)* (DN 12)[114] outlines three types of blameworthy teachers:

1. One who hasn't achieved the contemplative goal but teaches for others' welfare, yet disciples ignore the teachings and go their own way;

2. **One who hasn't achieved the goal, teaches, and disciples follow, but the teacher neglects their own practice**; and

3. One who has achieved the goal, teaches, but disciples ignore the teachings.

In contrast, blameless teachers include the Tathāgata (Buddha) who teaches the Dhamma leading to attainments like stream-entry or arahantship, and disciples who follow and achieve similar distinctions.

In my considered judgment, Sangharakshita manifestly belongs to the second of the Buddha's categories of blameworthy teachers. He never claimed enlightenment, and the well-documented reports of abuse would in any case render such a claim untenable — especially during the very years in which he was delivering the teachings that his followers still regard as foundational. Thus, while he expounded his own interpretation of the Dharma and his disciples embraced it with devotion, he himself persistently violated the ethical precepts he professed.

In Triratna, continuing the ancient Theravāda tradition, lay followers recite the Five Precepts in the ancient Pāli language. The third of these precepts is:

Kāmesu micchācāra veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi

When we break this phrase down word by word, its literal meaning becomes clear. *Kāmesu* refers to "sensual pleasures" or anything connected with sensory desire, especially (though not only) sexual desire. *Micchācāra* means "wrong" or "improper conduct." *Veramaṇī* is the practice of "refraining" or "abstaining" from something. *Sikkhāpadaṃ* is a "training rule" or "precept," and *samādiyāmi* is the solemn declaration "I undertake" or "I take upon myself."

Put together as faithfully as possible to the original grammar, the line therefore translates literally as:

"I undertake the training rule of abstaining from wrong conduct in sensual pleasures."

In everyday English, most Buddhist teachers and communities render it more naturally as "I undertake the precept to abstain from sexual misconduct" or "to refrain from misconduct concerning sensual pleasures." The literal wording, however, deliberately keeps the scope a little broader than "sexual" alone; it covers any form of selfish, harmful, or exploitative behaviour driven by sensory craving, with sexual misconduct being the most common and obvious example.

For centuries, millions of ordinary Buddhists — farmers, merchants, parents, and householders — have repeated this very phrase as a gentle but firm promise to live with restraint, respect, and care for others in an area of life where people can so easily cause pain. The ancient words still carry the same importance today.

Sangharakshita also introduced a counterpart to what he called the traditional "negative" precepts. In Triratna, lay followers also recite the Five Positive Precepts in their own language. The third of these positive precepts is:

"With stillness, simplicity and contentment, I purify my body."

To the extent that the Triratna Buddhist Community is not composed of fluent native speakers of Pāli, **it is remarkable that Sangharakshita's followers are never encouraged to recite, in their own language, a form of words that explicitly means "I undertake the training principle to abstain from sexual misconduct."**

While the teachings abundantly illustrate the importance of refraining from sexual misconduct, the deliberate decision not to place that undertaking in the vernacular of the practitioner, at the very foundation of their commitment, must be regarded as highly questionable — especially in view of the history of sexual and psychological abuse within the movement.

Sangharakshita's practice of retaining the classically "negative" precepts in Pāli while presenting his own "positive precepts" solely in English creates a subtle but significant veil. This linguistic separation risks distancing the minds of vulnerable newcomers from direct, unambiguous engagement with the core ethical restraints of the Buddhist tradition.

A revealing contrast is provided by the Plum Village tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh. Fully recognising that the precepts constitute the indispensable groundwork of practice, and acutely aware how far contemporary Western conditioning has drifted from traditional Buddhist ethical sensitivity, Hạnh formulated clear, detailed and contemporary undertakings that are **always recited in the practitioner's mother tongue**.

The Third Mindfulness Training in that tradition reads as follows:

"**True Love**

"Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I am committed to cultivating responsibility and learning ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families, and society. Knowing that sexual desire is not love, and that sexual activity motivated by craving always harms myself as well as others, I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without mutual consent, true love, and a deep, long-term commitment. I resolve to find spiritual support for the

integrity of my relationship from family members, friends, and sangha with whom there is support and trust. I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct. Seeing that body and mind are interrelated, I am committed to learn appropriate ways to take care of my sexual energy and to cultivate the four basic elements of true love — loving kindness, compassion, joy, and inclusiveness — for the greater happiness of myself and others. Recognising the diversity of human experience, I am committed not to discriminate against any form of gender identity or sexual orientation. Practicing true love, we know that we will continue beautifully into the future."[115]

This formulation is lucid, comprehensive, and entirely free of any distinction between "negative" and "positive" precepts. It enables even the newest practitioner to grasp immediately and unmistakably how ethical sexual conduct is to be lived for the welfare of all beings.

Sangharakshita's repeated failure to observe the very precepts he taught renders him, during the periods of that misconduct, unequivocally unworthy as a teacher. Yet the responsibility ultimately lies with the disciple who chooses the teacher. That a significant number of Triratna Order members continue to offer him fervent allegiance speaks volumes about them as well.

The sexual abuse perpetrated by Sangharakshita took place in the context of relations with certain of his so-called "spiritual friends." In the *Sigālovāda Sutta* (DN 31), the Buddha enumerates the marks of true friendship. A genuine friend:

- protects you when you are heedless and guards your wealth;
- is a refuge in danger;

- does not abandon you in misfortune, even at the cost of their own life;
- restrains you from evil, encourages you in good, teaches you what you have not yet learned, and points out the path to heaven;
- rejoices in your good fortune and wards off criticism;
- praises those who praise you and restrains those who would speak ill.

Measured against these criteria, Sangharakshita's conduct towards those he called friends fell gravely short.

In the *Nagaravindeyya Sutta* (MN 150) the Buddha states plainly that an ascetic or brahmin who remains in the grip of greed, hatred, and delusion with respect to the six sense spheres, and who is neither inwardly at peace nor possessed of impeccable conduct, does not deserve honour, respect, reverence, or veneration. The reason is stark: those who seek guidance are themselves still subject to these same defilements and therefore cannot recognise in such a teacher any superior attainment. The Buddha's implication is unequivocal: one who claims to teach his Dhamma ought to be free of these taints. Sangharakshita, by his own documented behaviour, was not. By the Buddha's own standard, therefore, he did not merit the reverence his followers accorded him.

My own discernment entirely concurs with the Buddha's.

To those who remain in the Triratna Order: if you find yourselves unable to accept these explicit teachings of the Buddha, or if you believe Sangharakshita worthy of honour and veneration on some other ground, that very dissonance may be the clearest signal that the moment has come for a fearless examination of your own ethical

foundations and of whether the movement you serve has yet become truly Buddhist.

Among Order members one may reasonably suspect that public defensiveness (such as comments on critical websites) masks a deeper private resistance, which in turn conceals an even more pervasive unspoken resistance. Where such institutional denial exists, a few isolated "bad actors" can be removed; but an unacknowledged collective refusal to face the truth renders genuine reform almost impossible.

Finally, the Buddha's counsel on receiving criticism (DN 1, *Brahmajāla Sutta*):

> "Mendicants, if others criticise me, the teaching, or the Saṅgha, don't make yourselves resentful, bitter, and exasperated. You'll get angry and upset, which would be an obstacle for you alone. ... [Rather,] you should explain that what is untrue is in fact untrue: 'This is why that's untrue, this is why that's false. There's no such thing in us, it's not found among us."[116]

Let those who contemplate attacking this book or its author first weigh this instruction carefully. And let them also recall the explicit warning given at the outset: this book is intended only for those who feel able to encounter a rigorous and at times severe critique of Sangharakshita and certain Triratna practices with genuine equanimity.

A Drop of Honey

Undoubtedly, those members of the Triratna Buddhist Order who have not yet attained enlightenment are, to varying degrees, deeply and personally invested in the institution. It is therefore understandable that they might

experience profound humiliation or disorientation were a trenchant critique of Triratna to gain widespread acceptance as truthful among their family, friends, and wider social circle. They might feel that the years devoted to training for ordination had been squandered, or conclude that no viable spiritual path exists beyond Triratna, or despair of meaningful reform given the Order's fundamentally undemocratic structure.

The most pressing difficulty, however, lies in how they can account — to themselves, to their loved ones, to their Dharma siblings further down the hierarchy — for what must increasingly appear, in the light of growing public acknowledgement of their teacher's grave wrongdoing, as an obstinate and unquestioning allegiance.

Such nagging issues, in whomever they may arise, would be "judgments driven by proliferating perceptions"[117], or *prapañca*. When attached to, *prapañca* serves to give rise to the volitional mental states of defensive self-preservation, an 'eternalist' stance ripe with wrong view and unskillful karma.

In letting go of *prapañca* there ends "the underlying tendencies to desire, repulsion, views, doubt, conceit, the desire for continued existence, and ignorance. This is the end of taking up the rod and the sword, the end of quarrels, arguments, and disputes, of accusations, divisive speech, and lies. This is where these bad, unskillful qualities cease without anything left over."[118]

Those who aspire wisely, though not yet having attained full enlightenment, readily acknowledge the unwholesome tendencies of mind that, through proliferation, have given rise to delusion. They examine these tendencies in the light of dependent origination and do not avert their gaze from the vessels in which unskilful karma has accumulated.

Yet the prospect is far from bleak. The authentic Dharma one has internalised is not erased merely because one ceases to follow a particular teacher. To the extent that the true Dharma is encountered within the Triratna Buddhist Order it is not, in its essence, Sangharakshita's own creation; the greater part derives directly from the Buddha and from revered masters of established lineages whose authority universally commands respect.

Indeed, the roots of a lot of Sangharakshita's presentation of the Dharma can be traced to the Buddha himself or to later teachers of unimpeachable and long-established standing. It would, admittedly, be a considerable undertaking to identify those sources afresh and to restate the teachings in their original terms. Nevertheless, it is entirely feasible to preserve the substance of the wisdom transmitted within Triratna without ever invoking Sangharakshita's personal formulations, simply by returning, as it were, to the primary sources that he himself translated and adapted.

Many members of the Order possess the scholarly depth sufficient to articulate an authentic presentation of the Buddha's teaching that stands independent of Sangharakshita's interpretations. Numerous books have already been written, and countless retreats led, by Order members whose work makes no reference whatever to him. In a mature spiritual tradition such work would be actively encouraged, cultivated, and accorded the highest respect.

The greater challenge arises with those elements Sangharakshita introduced from non-Buddhist sources — particularly certain Western philosophical ideas that sit uneasily with traditional Buddhist thought. Much of this material merits careful re-examination in any case; a sig-

nificant portion appears to date from periods when his personal conduct was ethically compromised and may therefore, from a Buddhist standpoint, be legitimately set aside. A chronological review of when specific doctrines entered the FWBO/Triratna lexicon would allow judicious pruning. Such discernment is properly the task of those who have already seen through and quieted the *prapañca* associated with these issues.

Abandoning Cultish Dogmatism

Perhaps the greatest obstruction to the flourishing of fresh ideas within Triratna is its cultish dogma. As we have seen, Sangharakshita's own talks and material from the Order's 'Seven Papers' displays a high degree of dogmatism, particularly when they become established as routine course and study material in the leader-centric ordination process.

In the *Caṅkī Sutta* (MN 95), the Buddha teaches a young brahmin named Kāpaṭika (also referred to as Bhāradvāja) about the proper way to preserve truth without falling into dogmatism. This discourse occurs in the context of discussing stages of spiritual development, such as faith, approval, oral tradition, reasoned reflection, and acceptance of a view after pondering. At each stage, the Buddha emphasises that while one may hold a position based on these factors, it is improper to rigidly conclude that it is exclusively correct.

For example, regarding faith the Buddha said:

> "If a person has faith, they preserve truth by saying, 'Such is my faith.' But they don't yet come to the categorical conclusion: 'This is the only truth, anything else is futile.'"[119]

This pattern is repeated for the other stages, underscoring that even with conviction or knowledge, a wise

person avoids asserting absolute exclusivity and dismissing all alternatives as false. The teaching is presented as guidance for preserving truth without attachment to fixed views, and while addressed primarily to brahmins in this sutta, it applies broadly to practitioners as part of the Buddha's instructions on right view and avoiding clinging.

Furthermore, the *Caṅkī Sutta* extends its guidance on preserving truth by instructing novices to rigorously assess the personal qualities of any prospective teacher before placing faith in them, emphasising a thorough investigation into whether the teacher is free from the defilements of greed, hatred, and delusion that could compromise their integrity and lead to harmful teachings. The Buddha outlines a methodical scrutiny: one must observe if the teacher's bodily and verbal conduct reflects these unwholesome states — such as qualities arousing greed that might drive them to falsely claim enlightenment or exploit others — or if their doctrine aligns with profound, subtle principles incompatible with such flaws, ultimately deeming the teacher worthy only if purified of these traits. **Applied to Sangharakshita, the founder of Triratna, his history of sexual misconduct, including coercive and abusive relationships with male disciples during the 1970s and 1980s, alongside accusations of psychological manipulation and exploitation that surfaced repeatedly over decades, would indicate pervasive greed (manifest as lustful exploitation) and potentially delusion (in rationalising such behaviour as spiritual practice), thereby disqualifying him under the sutta's criteria as a reliable guide to the Dharma and underscoring how unchecked authority in Triratna may perpetuate dogmatic adherence despite evident ethical failings.**

For the Triratna Buddhist Order to be recognised as authentically Buddhist, its ordination process and the materials that inform it must be subjected to rigorous review and revision in the light of the Buddha's own teachings. As matters stand — at least to the extent that the Seven Papers continue to define its governing principles — the Order remains a dogmatic, cult-like organisation marked by pronounced insularity and an extremely limited tolerance for dissent. It effectively proclaims Sangharakshita's worldview as the highest, his presentation of the Dharma as the truest, and his Order as the most exalted spiritual community to which one might belong.

The resignation or stepping back from executive positions of any senior figures who remain committed to the maintenance of the Seven Papers as essential features of ordination might be considered a positive step towards real beneficial change in a move towards a more universal community, for the benefit of all beings.

Abandoning Cultish Hierarchies

Cultish hierarchies manifest not only within groups but also within the individual whose worldview has been reshaped by doctrines and practices suffused with cult-like characteristics. By "cultish hierarchies" at the group level, I mean rigidly stratified power structures — typically pyramidal — where authority is concentrated at the apex in a charismatic leader or a small, elite inner circle that exhibits unmistakable cultic traits. At the individual level, the same dynamic produces a schism in consciousness: an "old me" versus a "new me," or a "bad them" versus a "good us," once the person has identified with the group.

A celebrated spiritual teacher, deeply versed in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity, once observed:

> "No one ever transforms himself into an enlightened pattern of life by dividing himself into two pieces — good-I and bad-me — wherein good-I preaches to bad-me and tries to remake it, as though a human being were truly divided ... All this is doomed to fail because there is a secret alliance, a hidden staircase, between good-I and bad-me. Good-I looks down upon bad-me and, wagging its finger, says, "Tsk, tsk, you really shouldn't be like that!" Yet all the while bad-me is quietly feeding its energy up the back stairs to good-I, enabling good-I to moralise — for the same motive that drives bad-me: "I must become better so that I can feel superior and more proud of myself."[120]

Thus every form of self-conscious spirituality that relies on preaching, moral exhortation, and internal dialogue between a virtuous self and a defective self is, at root, profoundly inauthentic. One of the central insights of Buddhism — what might be called its "religion of non-religion" — is to reveal the most exalted spiritual reality precisely through the most ordinary and everyday, refusing any separation between the two. The more unremarkable and quotidian the expression, the more authentically spiritual it is. The more it postures as "spiritual" — as something set apart from daily life — the more fraudulent it becomes.

The same principle applies at the societal level. No society ever transforms itself into an enlightened order by splitting itself into "good us" and "bad them," then proclaiming, "We must improve so that we can feel morally superior and impose our vision upon the world," especially when "bad them" very often harbour the identical impulse to impose their own vision.

This is the fatal flaw in Sangharakshita's teaching and in the institutional DNA he bequeathed to Triratna: a pervasive "us vs. them" mentality, coupled with the conviction that his "new society" is destined to supplant a

fatally flawed world by withdrawing from it as far as possible and selectively admitting its inhabitants in order to purify them.

Subhuti's manifesto "The Dharma Revolution and the New Society", thoroughly steeped in Sangharakshita's outlook, articulates this separatist vision with disarming frankness. He calls for the creation of insulated "nuclei" that will preserve purity in a corrupt environment: "In the midst of the old society, we need to create miniature new societies: situations in which people live and work together on the basis of the Dharma. From those 'new societies in miniature', we can go out to transform the larger society around us" (p. 20). He cautions against too much contact with outsiders: "It's terribly disheartening to live with people who deny your aspiration or are simply indifferent to it. Indifference is probably a more powerful sedative than opposition," and insists, "we need support, we need a community of like-minded people around us. If we can, we need to live with or at least around people who share our aspiration" (p. 21).

The endgame is openly expansionist, albeit framed as compassion: "Our aspiration should be to expand that oasis so that it fills the desert," drawing outsiders into a "spiritual oasis, where they can refresh themselves" before guiding them "closer to the heart of the new society (p. 23). This language, however nobly intentioned, perpetuates the very dualism and hierarchy it claims to overcome. What is required instead is a Buddhism that heals division rather than institutionalising it — one that embraces the everyday without the delusion of superiority.

Abandoning Counterfeit Dharmas

It is perhaps ironic that Sangharakshita himself, in later life, came to advocate the rigorous examination of all teachings against the Pāli suttas:

"Sangharakshita considers that the historical Buddha is the touchstone of the whole tradition, whether as regards doctrine or imagery. In the case of the teachings the touchstone is the Buddha's words as found in the earliest Suttas. Whatever doctrines evolved later ... should be tested against the basic teachings found in the early records, especially, although not solely, in the Pāli Canon."[121]

To exempt any element of Triratna — including Sangharakshita's own teachings or the hierarchical structures he bequeathed — from such scrutiny would betray a profound arrogance within the Order. Therefore, undertake a thorough review and firmly reject whatever counterfeit Dharma you encounter. A prudent starting point would be those teachings that cannot be traced directly to the Buddha's original pronouncements, and those institutional forms that appear to contravene his explicit instructions.

The Buddha himself foresaw the decline of the true Dharma. In the *Saddhammappatirūpaka Sutta* (SN 16.13)[122], Venerable Mahākassapa asks the Buddha why, in earlier times, there were "fewer training rules but more mendicants established in final knowledge," whereas now there are "more training rules but fewer mendicants established in final knowledge." The Buddha explains that this occurs "when beings are declining and the true teaching is disappearing." He clarifies that the true Dharma does not vanish until a "counterfeit of the true teaching arises in the world," likening it to how "genuine gold does not disappear so long as counterfeit gold has not arisen in the world." The decline is not caused by external elements like earth, water, fire, or air, but by internal failings within the community.

The Buddha identifies five detrimental qualities leading to the Dharma's instability: when monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen "dwell without respect for the Teacher," "without respect for the teaching," "without respect for the Saṅgha," "without respect for the training," and "without respect for immersion." In such cases, "the true teaching disappears." Conversely, cultivating respect and deference for these five ensures the Dharma's "establishment, settlement, and non-perishing." By respecting the true teaching, the true teaching will be preserved for the benefit future beings.

Abandoning Elite Marks of Distinction

In the monastic community of the Sangha, the traditional kesa — or monastic robe — serves as a profound symbol of renunciation and commitment to the Dhamma. Yet, there exists a subtle danger when such garments are beautified in bright colours or adorned with ornamental marks of accomplishment, particularly for those newly ordained within a tradition. These embellishments can foster enchantment, transforming the kesa from a tool of humility into a badge of spiritual pride. This not only risks breeding attachment but also undermines the core Buddhist principles of non-attachment and equanimity. Drawing from the Pāli Canon we find clear guidance emphasising simplicity in attire and warning against the pitfalls of external symbols of attainment.

In the *Mahāsaropama Sutta* (MN 29) the Buddha warns against practicing for the sake of "gain, honour and renown" relative to ones fellow practitioners:

> "[A] clansman goes forth ... . When he has gone forth ..., he acquires gain, honour, and renown. He is pleased with that gain, honour, and renown, and his intention is fulfilled. On account of it he lauds himself and disparages others thus: 'I am

one who gets gain and renown, but these other bhikkhus are unknown, of no account.' He becomes intoxicated with that gain, honour, and renown, grows negligent, falls into negligence, and being negligent, he lives in suffering."[123]

The *Vinaya Pitaka*, the disciplinary code for monks, repeatedly stresses the need for robes to remain unadorned and functional, lest they become objects of desire or status. Instead, he permitted dyes from natural sources — roots, stems, bark, leaves, flowers, and fruits — but in mixed forms to ensure the robes were subdued and unremarkable (*Vinaya Pitaka, Mahavagga VIII*). This rule arose from observing monks in overly colourful attire, which could distract from practice and invite attachment. Furthermore, the Canon limits monks to just three robes: "I allow you, O monks, three robes: a double Sanghati (outer cloak), a single Uttarasanga (upper robe), a single Antaravasaka (inner robe)" (*Vinaya Pitaka, Mahavagga*). Possessing extras incurs an offence: "Whoever monk should wear an extra robe, there is an offence of expiation involving forfeiture" (*Vinaya Pitaka, Bhikkhu Vibhanga*). These prescriptions underscore that the robe is a mere requisite for modesty and protection, not a canvas for displaying seniority or achievement. Putting it succinctly: "The thoughtful Brother has a definite object in view when he wears a robe, namely, to keep off the cold" (*Litta Jātaka* Ja 91). Adorning senior members of the Sangha with elaborate kesas risks turning this essential item into a source of craving, directly countering the Buddha's intent for monastic life rooted in simplicity.

Beyond material guidelines, the Pāli Canon cautions that true spiritual accomplishment lies not in external trappings but in inner cultivation. The Buddha warns against equating asceticism with mere appearances: "I do not ascribe asceticism to a robe wearer just because he

wears a monk's robe. I do not ascribe asceticism to a forest hermit just because he lives in the forest. I do not ascribe asceticism to a knower of text just because he knows many texts … Not because a man wears a robe, dwells in the forest, knows the texts, speaks much about the Doctrine, can he get rid of craving propensities, can he get rid of hating propensities, can he get rid of delusive propensities" (*Sutta Nipata*, as cited in traditional commentaries). This teaching reminds us that ordination and the donning of a kesa do not inherently confer enlightenment; they are supports for practice, not endpoints. For those enamoured with a pretty kesa as a mark of progress, this attachment can hinder the very liberation the kesa is supposed to represent.

Compounding this, the Canon identifies pride and conceit (*māna*) as profound defilements that obstruct the path. In the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha exhorts: "One should give up anger, renounce pride, and overcome all fetters. Suffering never befalls him who clings not to mind and body and is detached" (Dhammapada 221). Pride in perceived accomplishments — such as an ornate kesa signifying seniority — fuels *māna*, one of the last fetters to be eradicated before full awakening. The *Vatthupama Sutta* further illustrates this: "Knowing conceit to be a defilement of the mind, he abandons it" (MN 7). In the *Ambattha Sutta*, the Buddha humbles a proud Brahmin youth, demonstrating that true superiority arises from ethical conduct and wisdom, not birth or external status (DN 3). Applying this to the Sangha, adorning seniors with distinctive marks risks inflating ego, diverting focus from the Noble Eightfold Path to superficial hierarchies.

In essence, the Pāli Canon's teachings advocate for unadorned robes to preserve the Sangha's purity and prevent the ordained from becoming ensnared by symbols of

accomplishment. By eschewing ornamentation, the community upholds the Buddha's vision: a life of detachment where spiritual growth emerges from within, free from the illusions of pride and possession. This approach not only safeguards individual practitioners but strengthens the Sangha as a beacon of true renunciation.

Therefore, **renounce the embellished Triratna kesa**. If you are genuinely committed to the monastic life, let a plain, dye-stained robe — worn solely for warmth — suffice, exactly as the Buddha prescribed. Anything beyond this merely serves as a non-Dharmic badge of distinction that contributes nothing to the enlightenment of yourself or any other being.

Avoiding Misleading Remarks Regarding Other Traditions

As we have observed, in numerous works by Sangharakshita — including his contributions to the *Seven Papers*, which serve as a foundational constitutional document for the Triratna Buddhist Community — the condition of Buddhism beyond Triratna is consistently portrayed as degenerate[124], corrupt or decadent, and as unworkable in the modern world[125]. He selectively cites anecdotal evidence and extrapolates from it sweeping claims of corruption, thereby reinforcing his own positions while simultaneously discrediting other traditions that might compete with or hinder the acceptance of his vision.

The result is that his followers are left with profoundly distorted and deeply unfair impressions of the wider Buddhist world, impressions that do a serious disservice to the many dedicated practitioners in traditions worldwide.

We should firmly reject such manipulative and misleading assertions and instead examine for ourselves the

abundant evidence of Buddhism thriving in its many forms around the globe.

Examples of Buddhism Thriving

It may come as a surprise to many in Triratna that outside of its sheltered walls Buddhism remains a significant global religion in 2025, with estimates of its adherents varying widely due to differences in how affiliation is measured — ranging from around 324 million to over 500 million people, or roughly 4-7% of the world's population[126][127]. While some data indicates a slight decline in absolute numbers over recent decades, particularly in East Asia[128], the faith continues to hold strong in its traditional heartlands and is experiencing growth in Western countries through meditation centres, secular mindfulness programs, and diaspora communities[129]. It serves as the state religion in several nations, including Cambodia, Myanmar, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka, where it shapes cultural, social, and political life[130]. In regions like China, official figures suggest over 250 million practitioners, though actual engagement may be higher when including cultural Buddhists. Challenges such as secularisation and geopolitical tensions exist[131], but vibrant adaptations — including those in the Plum Village tradition founded by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh[132] — support its ongoing relevance through online teachings, youth initiatives[133][134], and global mindfulness programs[135][136].

Thriving Buddhist Monasteries

Several monasteries worldwide demonstrate Buddhism's vitality through active monastic life, educational programs, retreats, and community outreach, including those in the Plum Village tradition which em-

phasise mindfulness and interbeing with eleven official centres globally.

Plum Village Monastery, France: The flagship centre of the Plum Village tradition near Bordeaux, comprising multiple hamlets (Upper, Lower, New), hosts year-round retreats and serves as a vibrant hub for international practitioners. In 2025, it organised major events like the Wellbeing Retreat (June), Science Retreat (June), and Wake Up Retreat (August) with hundreds of attendees, reflecting ongoing expansions in online and in-person programs that draw diverse crowds for engaged mindfulness practices.[137]

Sravasti Abbey, Washington, USA: This monastery, founded in 2003, hosts a growing community of monks and nuns engaged in daily practices, meditation retreats, and educational events like the annual Sharing the Dharma Day. It also runs robust prison dharma programs, supporting inmate-led Buddhist groups in U.S. prisons, with recent expansions in outreach and wartime dharma initiatives highlighting its role in fostering mindfulness amid modern challenges.[138]

Deer Park Monastery, California, USA: Part of the Plum Village tradition and located in Escondido, this centre offers retreats, day visits, and monastic training in a serene mountain setting. Recent activities include mindfulness days and themed retreats, with reports of growing attendance and community outreach underscoring its flourishing as a key West Coast practice site for applied Zen teachings.[139]

Key Monastery (Kye Gompa), Himachal Pradesh, India: Perched in the Spiti Valley, this ancient Tibetan

Buddhist monastery houses around 200 young monks and serves as a centre for religious education and rituals. Its ongoing restoration and active monastic training programs underscore its enduring spiritual and cultural significance in a remote Himalayan setting.[140]

Blue Cliff Monastery, New York, USA: Within the Plum Village tradition and nestled in Pine Bush, it provides residential programs, meditation halls, and gardens for deep practice. In 2025, it continues to host retreats and public events, with its active monastic community—the largest in the West—contributing to the tradition's expansion through teachings on understanding and love.[141]

Kopan Monastery, Kathmandu, Nepal: Known for its international appeal, this Gelugpa tradition monastery offers extended meditation retreats and courses drawing participants from around the world. With facilities for both monks and lay practitioners, it continues to expand its programs, including novice ordinations and teachings on Vajrayāna practices, reflecting strong demand for immersive Buddhist study.[142]

Thai Plum Village International Meditation Center, Thailand: Situated in Pak Thong Chai as part of the Plum Village network, this centre focuses on monastic life and lay retreats in a tropical environment. It features ongoing programs like the 2025 Rain Retreat and pre-aspirant initiatives for young women, drawing international participants and indicating sustained interest and renewal in the region.[143]

Tongdosa Monastery, South Korea: As one of Korea's "Three Jewel Temples," it preserves relics of the

Buddha and maintains a thriving monastic community with over 500 resident monks. Recent cultural heritage designations and visitor programs, including temple stays, illustrate its role in sustaining Seon (Zen) Buddhism amid Korea's modern society.[144]

European Institute of Applied Buddhism (EIAB), Germany: Based in Waldbröl, within the Plum Village tradition, it emphasises applied mindfulness in daily life through courses and retreats. Recent sessions on community and ethics reflect its thriving status as a European bridge for engaged Buddhist practices.[145]

Thriving Buddhist Communities

Buddhist communities are flourishing in diverse contexts, from diaspora settlements to urban centres, often blending traditional practices with contemporary adaptations, as seen in the Plum Village tradition's over one thousand local lay Sanghas worldwide that promote ethical living and community building.

Bylakuppe Tibetan Settlement, Karnataka, India: Home to over 20,000 Tibetan refugees since 1961, this is India's largest Tibetan community and a hub for Tibetan Buddhism. It features multiple monasteries like Namdroling, vibrant festivals, and educational institutions that preserve language and rituals, with recent reports noting its resilience and cultural vibrancy as a model of exile adaptation.[146]

Global Lay Sanghas in the Plum Village Tradition: Over one thousand local groups worldwide meet regularly for mindfulness practice, fostering bonds of empathy and joy. Directories like the International Sangha

Directory support connections, with new Sanghas forming in cities, workplaces, and schools, indicating widespread grassroots flourishing through accessible dharma programs.[147]

Dharmachakra Buddhist Center (now Kadampa Meditation Center Mexico), Mexico City, Mexico: Celebrating its 30th anniversary in 2025, this centre has grown into a major urban hub for Kadampa teachings, offering meditation classes, retreats, and community events that attract diverse participants. Its expansion reflects Buddhism's increasing foothold in Latin America through accessible dharma programs.[148]

Wake Up Communities: Targeted at young adults (18-35), these groups organise retreats and events emphasising love and understanding. The 2025 Wake Up Retreat in France with over 800 attendees exemplifies vibrant youth engagement and community strength, addressing modern challenges like self-hate and societal division.[149]

Asian American Buddhist Communities, USA: Across cities like Los Angeles and New York, these groups maintain temples and centres rooted in Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions.[150]

Dharamshala Tibetan Community, Himachal Pradesh, India: This exile hub hosts multiple sects of Tibetan Buddhism with active monasteries, chanting sessions, and discussions. Its thriving scene includes international pilgrims and educational centres, supporting the preservation and global spread of Tibetan practices.[151]

Thriving Buddhist Societies

In countries where Buddhism is deeply integrated, it influences governance, education, and daily life, contributing to social cohesion. While the Plum Village tradition does not dominate entire societies, its global influence extends through engaged practices in diverse contexts, contributing to personal and communal well-being.

Bhutan: As a constitutional monarchy with Vajrayāna Buddhism as the state religion, over 75% of the population practices it. The government's Gross National Happiness index incorporates Buddhist principles, with active monasteries and festivals like Tshechu demonstrating its central role in national identity and well-being.[152]

Sri Lanka: With about 70% of the population identifying as Theravāda Buddhists, the country features thousands of temples and a strong monastic tradition. Recent cultural revivals, including pilgrimages to sites like Anuradhapura with its ancient stupas and monasteries, highlight Buddhism's enduring societal influence amid economic recovery efforts.[153]

Cambodia: Buddhism is the state religion for over 97% of Cambodians, with Wat Phnom and other temples serving as community anchors. Post-Khmer Rouge reconstruction has led to a resurgence, including monk-led education and social programs that address poverty and health, underscoring its role in national healing and stability.[154]

TRIRATNA KALYĀNAMITTA SANGHA

Towards a Decentralised and Dharma-Centred Sangha: Reimagining Leadership in the Triratna Buddhist Community

The Seven Papers institutionalised a personality-centric model that elevated the abusive founder as the indispensable axis of spiritual authority, lineage, and doctrinal interpretation. This created systemic vulnerabilities — dependency, insularity, and bounded choice — that persist beyond Sangharakshita's passing in 2018. Subhuti's 2023 clarifications acknowledge risks like cults of personality, yet the foundational architecture remains tethered to discipleship chains and a "particular presentation" of the Dharma.

A truly open leadership structure must return to the Buddha's counsel in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*: "Live as islands unto yourselves, refuges unto yourselves, with the Dharma as your island and refuge." Authority flows from the Dharma and Sangha, not a person. The proposal below eliminates cult-like risks by embracing radical decentralisation, pluralism, transparency, and peer accountability, drawing from early Buddhist councils, modern Theravāda sanghas, and Insight Meditation communities.

Core Principles for Reform

These principles directly counter the aggregated cult-like traits:

- **Primacy of the Dharma Over Personality** — The Order redefines itself as practitioners taking refuge in

the Three Jewels, without reference to any founder's "particular presentation."

- **Pluralism and Open Inquiry** — Multiple interpretations encouraged; external teachers welcomed without fear of exclusion.
- **Distributed Authority** — No irreplaceable figures or lifelong gatekeepers.
- **Transparency and Accountability** — All decisions open and reviewable.
- **Rotation and Term Limits** — Power circulates to prevent entrenchment.
- **Consent-Based Decision-Making** — Consensus or sociocratic models replace top-down hierarchy.

Proposed Structural Framework

1. The Order as a Peer Network (Dissolving Hierarchical Discipleship)

- The Triratna Buddhist Order becomes a voluntary association of peers who have requested ordination based on demonstrated effective Going for Refuge and ethical commitment. Membership is not "disciples of Sangharakshita and his disciples" but autonomous practitioners mutually recognising one another.
- Ordination is granted by regional ordination teams (public preceptors elected or lottery-selected) with transparent, published criteria. No central College holds veto power. Appeals go to ad-hoc peer councils. This removes charismatic leader dependency and grooming risks.

2. Federated Regional Sanghas (Decentralised Autonomy)

- Authority devolves to continental or national areas (Europe, Americas, India, etc.), each with its own elected Area Council. Councils handle local finances, property, ordination, and ethics with full sovereignty, coordinated only for international retreats or projects.
- An annual or biennial International Gathering functions as a council-like assembly where delegates rotate. Decisions require supermajorities or consensus, with no binding precedent from past figures. This dismantles "us vs. them" insularity and all-or-nothing loyalty by allowing regional diversity, i.e. more freedom (which is the end goal after all…)

3. Rotating Stewardship Roles (Eliminating Permanent Hierarchy)

- Leadership roles (chairs, public preceptors, project coordinators) serve fixed terms of four to seven years, non-renewable consecutively. Selection uses sortition combined with consent-based election, inspired by ancient Vinaya and sociocracy.
- A small, rotating International Coordination Circle handles logistics only, without doctrinal authority. Spiritual seniority earns respect but never administrative power. This prevents ideological manipulation and suppression of dissent.

4. A Living Dharma Commons (Pluralistic System of Practice)

- The Sikkha Project[155] evolves into a permanent open platform where any Order member proposes

trainings, retreats, or texts. Community rates and adopts them organically.
• Centres freely invite teachers from other lineages without approval. Study of Theravāda, Zen, or Tibetan sources becomes normalised. The Seven Papers retire or reissue as historical documents with critical commentaries. This dissolves ego-remoulding into a singular identity and ideological manipulation.

5. Independent Ethics and Safeguarding Sangha

• A fully independent body, elected from outside the Order and including external experts, investigates complaints with published outcomes and appeals. Regional centres maintain separate safeguarding officers. This prevents grooming disguised as growth and ensures accountability beyond internal loyalty.

6. Funding and Property as Commons

• To the extent that they are not already so held, all assets transfer to regional charitable trusts governed by rotating boards including non-Order donors. No central body controls resources, removing financial leverage.

Transition Pathway

• Years 1 and 2: Order-wide consultation and referendum on new constitution.
• Year 3: Regional councils form; College dissolves into transitional teams.
• Year 5: Full federation achieved; Seven Papers archived.

- Ongoing: International gatherings every two to three years for friendship and coordination.

This model preserves Triratna's strengths — engaged Buddhism, urban centres, team-based right livelihood — while liberating it from founder-centric constraints. It aligns with the Buddha's final words: no closed fist, no appointed successor, only the Dharma as teacher. The Sangha becomes a living, evolving body rather than a monument to one man. Such openness would resolve cult-like concerns and allow Triratna to flourish as a mature, confident expression of Western Buddhism. The ground beneath our feet would no longer shift with revelations about the past; it would rest firmly on the Dharma itself.

A New Name for a Renewed Sangha: Symbols of Opening and Continuity

If the Triratna Buddhist Community is to step fully into the decentralised, peer-led, pluralistic model outlined earlier, a name change — or at least a significant evolution of the name — would serve as a powerful ritual act of renewal. The word Triratna ("Three Jewels") remains beautiful, accurate, and deeply resonant; it is the heart of the tradition and carries no trace of personality cult. Retaining it honours the genuine spiritual inheritance while clearly signalling that the personality-centric phase is over. The task, therefore, is to add a qualifying phrase that evokes openness, friendship, autonomy, federation, and shared responsibility — qualities that directly counter the old hierarchical model.

Here are eight carefully considered possibilities, each with the reasoning that makes it suitable and appealing for the renewed community:

1. *Triratna Kalyāṇamitta Sangha*

The most elegant and deeply Buddhist option. *Kalyāṇamitta* ("spiritual friendship" or "noble friendship") was repeatedly emphasised by the Buddha as the "whole of the holy life" (*Upaddha Sutta*). Placing friendship at the centre of the name immediately communicates that authority now rests in peer relationships rather than in a founder or hierarchy. It feels warm, traditional, and revolutionary all at once.

2. *Triratna Open Sangha*

Simple, direct, and modern. "Open" instantly signals the end of exclusivity, secrecy, and gatekeeping. It appeals strongly to younger practitioners and those wary of authoritarian structures, while remaining completely faithful to the spirit of the Buddha's teaching.

3. *Triratna Dharma Network*

Neutral, contemporary, and accurate. "Network" conveys horizontal connection, decentralisation, and global reach without implying top-down control. It is the kind of name that feels natural in the twenty-first century and would read well on a website or retreat brochure.

4. Triratna Sangha Federation

Explicitly acknowledges the federated regional model. It is dignified, slightly formal, and carries the gravitas of an international movement that has matured beyond personality. The word "federation" quietly celebrates diversity and autonomy.

5. *Triratna Dhamma Fellowship*

(Using the Pāli spelling "Dhamma" to gently distance from the Sanskrit-heavy branding of the past.) "Fellowship" is warm, inclusive, and has a long history in Western spiritual circles (Quaker, Tolkien, etc.). It evokes companionship on the path rather than discipleship to a person.

6. *Triratna Peer Sangha*

Stark and courageous. “Peer” is the single word that most directly repudiates the old hierarchical discipleship model. It is bold, contemporary, and would immediately reassure anyone researching the movement online that things have changed.

7. *Triratna Circle*

Short, memorable, and visually evocative. “Circle” implies equality (everyone can see everyone else), non-hierarchy, and continuity (in Celtic and indigenous traditions) sacred gathering. Centres could be called “Triratna Circle — Berlin”, “Triratna Circle — London”, etc. It feels fresh and inviting.

8. *Triratna Vimutta Sangha* (or *Triratna Vimoksha Sangha*)

For those who want a more liberation-oriented name. *Vimutta* (Pāli) or *Vimoksha* (Sanskrit) means “freed” or “liberated”. The name would declare: we have freed ourselves from the shadow of the past and now practise in the open air of the Dharma.

My personal recommendation would be either ***Triratna Kalyāṇamitta Sangha*** (the most beautiful and traditionally rooted) or ***Triratna Open Sangha*** (the clearest public statement of transformation). Both retain the treasured word Triratna while making the renewal unmistakable. A name is more than branding; it is a mantra, a proclamation. Choosing one of these would allow the community to turn the page with grace and confidence, honouring what was good in the past while stepping

freely into a future that truly belongs to the Three Jewels alone.

NOTES

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[5] As above, p. 104.

[6] As above, p. 115.

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[8] The *Sutta Piṭaka* (Basket of Discourse) is the second division of the *Pāli Tripiṭaka* in Theravāda Buddhism, containing over 10,000 suttas attributed to the Buddha or his close disciples.

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53:18-54:59

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